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LION-HEARTED DICK; the Gentleman Road-Agent.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE SPOTTER DETECTIVE," "INJUN DICK," "VELVET HAND," "GOLD DAN," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"NOW, JOHN—MY DEAR FRIEND JOHN—DON'T YOU LAY YOUR HAND UPON THAT WEAPON."

Lion-Hearted Dick;

The Gentleman Road-Agent.

A Wild Tale of California Adventure.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "TALBOT OF CINNABAR," "CAPTAIN DICK TALBOT," "THE RED MAZEPPA," "LA MAR-MOSET," "FRESH OF FRISCO," ETC.

CHAPTER I. HELD UP.

THE sun has gone down behind the far western hills; the dusk of the evening is stealing fast over hill and dale; the peak of Shasta looms up like a white-sheeted ghost in the dim light, looking down in silent majesty upon the lonely trail, winding like a curving snake by the banks of Shasta's silver river.

One living thing only is visible in all that wide expanse of country, lorded over by the old mountain, whose summit is forever crowned with a diadem of everlasting snow.

In a little glade by the side of the trail stands a man, roughly clad, and fully armed, a perfect specimen of manly excellence. A revolver is in his hand and he is trying the working of the weapon, while his attention is eagerly fixed upon the coming of a stage-coach, just visible in the distance, mounting the crest of a hill. A clump of rocks, shaded by bushes, half-conceals the watcher.

"Here comes the hearse; now for some lively music!" he cries.

'Tis plain there's mischief afoot!

Out from Cinnabar City, in the shadow of great Shasta's peak, rolled the coach, northward bound to the mining-camp known as Shasta Bar. And in the coach went the banker, Allan Murdock, and his fair daughter, Carlotta, two people who will play a prominent part in our tale. But of them more anon; first we will describe one of the oddest men in California who handled the reins of the stage.

Indigo Jake, the stage-driver, was a most decided character. He was a tall, lanky specimen of humanity, very sparing of words, and yet speaking with a culture that plainly showed he was a man of fine education. What his right name was no one in the Shasta region knew. When he had first made his appearance, in answer to inquiries, he had given his name as Jake, and as his complexion had a peculiar blue tinge, after the old fashion common to the mining region, a nick-name was at once bestowed upon him, and Indigo Jake he had ever since been called.

He was a good driver, and a man thoroughly to be depended upon, although well known to be a terribly hard drinker, and in regard to this a joke of his captured the town. When somebody in his hearing made the remark that he was a hard drinker, he indignantly denied it, and said he drank easier than any other man in the camp, and he would bet ducats on it, too.

There were four passengers in the coach. Murdock and his daughter, who sat on the back seat, Colonel Wash Perkins, and Lee Sing, an almond-eyed son of the East, who occupied the front one.

The colonel was one of the oldest inhabitants of the Bar. He was a man of fifty, almost a giant in size, with a noble, Jackson-like head, the summit of which was quite bald, while an iron-gray beard swept down over his chest to the extent of a foot or more. He was the express-agent and postmaster of the camp—a man universally liked, although he had one great fault: he was an inveterate drinker; in fact, the postmaster and the stage-driver were the two champion "fire-water tossers" of the region, and it was an open question not only who could drink the most liquor but who could show it the least, for the Shasta-Barite did not exist who could truthfully say that he had ever seen either one of the champions in such a condition that he could not stand up to the counter and take his "bug-juice" like a man.

Lee Sing, who was distinguished by the fact that he was the only heathen in the town, ran a flourishing washing establishment, and was further renowned for being the most desperate and determined gambler in the upper country—a lucky one, too, for he generally won, although the envious miners said that in "short-card" games, poker, eucher, and the like, this was due more to his superior skill as a cheat than to fortune smiling upon him. Be this as it may, the Chinaman had never been detected in any foul play. He had been quite a while in this country and spoke very good English, although as a rule not much given to talking.

It was not a sociable party, for the banker and the colonel were not on the best of terms. The colonel was an outspoken man, particularly when in liquor, and when Murdock had first hung out his shingle in the Bar, the postmaster immediately took an unaccountable dislike to him, without any reason whatever, as he had

taken occasion to declare himself, when, at the bar of the Quiet House, as the principal hotel was called, he had ventilated his opinion of the new-comer.

Murdock, though, never said a word against the colonel, except that it was a pity so nice a man should drink so much.

But without any reason there was a barrier between the two, and though each was scrupulously polite to the other whenever they met, yet they did not harmonize.

On the present occasion the colonel was very much in liquor as usual. He had happened to meet the Chinaman in Cinnabar City on the previous evening, and, for the honor of the "Bar," they had set out to astonish the natives, and succeeded in doing it, too. The colonel had stood up to the bar of the principal hotel until every opponent who dared to dispute his title of "chief" had been carried off on convenient shutters, and then he had accompanied Lee Sing on the "war-path" around town, and by the time morning came the heathen had "busted" four faro banks, skinned three "wheels of fortune," broke up one monte game and cleaned out the poker-players of the town of all their loose cash. And now, with an honest five thousand dollars in his ample pockets, the spoils of the night, Lee Sing dozed away in the corner with a contented mind, "allee samee 'Melican man!"

The colonel, although his head was in a bad condition, for he had not had an opportunity to sleep off the night's debauch, was attracted by Murdock's daughter the instant he got into the hack.

Murdock had expected, as a matter of course, that he would have company on the journey, but he was much annoyed when the colonel and his companion entered the stage, and great as was the command he had over his features it was as much as he could do to avoid showing his displeasure.

The colonel nodded to the banker when he got in and then, after settling himself down comfortably for the journey, fell to studying the face of the girl.

Murdock's sharp eyes soon discovered this and it did not tend to lessen the feeling of annoyance which he already felt.

The stage rattled on its way for a good half-hour before the silence was broken; then the colonel, unable to content himself longer with studying the face of the young lady, spoke:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Murdock," he said, "but I take it that you are escorting this young lady?"

Carlotta had noticed the steadfast gaze of the old gentleman, but as it was entirely respectful, although rather more earnest than the laws of courtesy allow, it did not materially annoy her.

"Yes, sir," replied the banker, shortly, as though he disliked the inquiry.

"It is very strange, but it seems to me as if I have seen this young lady before, and yet for the life of me I cannot remember where," remarked the colonel, musingly, the words addressed more to himself than to his companions, and as he spoke he allowed his head to fall forward upon his breast.

Murdock fidgeted uneasily upon his seat, while the girl looked amazed. She knew that she had never seen the gentleman before, for he was far too different from the common run of men to be easily forgotten, when once seen.

At this point the Chinaman, who had apparently been fast asleep, opened his eyes for a moment, took a good look at both Murdock and the girl, as if he too was curious about her, then he shut his orbs again and appeared to be totally unconscious of all around him.

This movement did not escape the banker, and it served to increase his uneasy feeling, for he distrusted the smooth and oily heathen, believing him to be a deep and subtle man.

"I do not think, colonel, that you have ever seen this lady before," Murdock remarked, "for she has just come from an Eastern boarding-school where she has been ever since she was a little girl."

"And why on earth does she come to this God forsaken region, fit only for savage beasts and half-civilized men worse even than the beasts whom they supplanted?" cried the old man, bluntly.

"She is my daughter, colonel, and the only home she has is with me."

"Your daughter!" and the colonel sat bolt upright and stared as if he could hardly believe it.

"Yes; possibly you can detect a resemblance?"

"Not a mite!" responded the other abruptly. "But, oh! how her face comes back to me from the lapse of distant years, and what a flood of painful memories it brings up! I thought I had forgotten all my troubles long ago. I have drank whisky enough to float a ship, and all to keep me from thinking of the past. Ah! young lady, if you are going to take up your quarters in Shasta Bar I shall have to get out or else go mad!"

Murdock affected to laugh.

"You mustn't give way to such ideas, colonel; you are only out of sorts now. Will

you take a little brandy? It is good stuff; I can recommend it." And the banker drew a flask from his pocket and proffered it to the colonel.

The dull eyes of the old man sparkled, and seizing the flask he took a good pull at it.

There was a strange expression in Murdock's eyes as he watched the liquor gurgling down the throat of the other.

"Give the Chinaman a drink—that is if you think he is Christian enough to appreciate good liquor."

"I'll warrant ye!"

But Lee Sing was already on the alert, and extending his hand for the bottle took a good swig at it, and yet Murdock, who was watching him, fancied that it was all pretense, and that the heathen had not in reality tasted a drop of the liquor. He did not say anything, though, but pretended to take a drink from the flask when it came back to him and then put it away.

"We shall be late in getting in," he remarked, "and I suppose we may as well make ourselves comfortable; a nap will be in order, and, thank goodness, we are not likely to be disturbed on this route by road-agents or any such cattle."

"Oh, no," observed the colonel, beginning to yawn and betraying evident signs of sleepiness, "I never war 'held up' by road-agents over this route in my life, and I reckon I'm about the oldest inhabitant of the Bar."

"No danger," and the banker settled back in his corner as if to compose himself to sleep.

Twenty minutes went by; the gray of the twilight was beginning to deepen into the shades of night when the coach came to a sudden stoppage in obedience to the command of a hoarse voice, which cried out:

"Halt! Pull up or you are a dead man!"

Indigo Jake just took one good look at the glistening barrels of the rifles leveled full at his heart and then pulled up his beasts with prompt celerity.

"Pardner, I pass, and you kin rake in the pile!" he ejaculated.

"What's the matter?" demanded Murdock, in alarm.

A masked man, roughly dressed, came out of the bushes.

CHAPTER II.

A HIGH-HANDED PROCEEDING.

THE new-comer was a stalwart, powerfully-built fellow, dressed after the miner fashion, in big boots, rough pantaloons, and red shirt, but in lieu of a hat he had a sort of a black bag drawn over his head, extending to his shoulders, with holes cut for eyes and mouth, so that his identity was most effectually disguised. In his hand he held a cocked revolver, and a couple more were belted to his waist.

He came out of the bushes at a point just about thirty yards from where the coach had halted.

In this same clump of bushes the figures of two more men could be distinguished, crouching down, rifle in hand.

"The top of the evening to you, Jake, old feller," said the road-agent, as he advanced leisurely toward the hack. He spoke in a loud, hoarse voice, evidently disguised.

The driver nodded in answer to the salutation. He had trolled a stage too long to dream of attempting resistance to these masters of the highway.

"You see my pards up yonder, I suppose?" remarked the road-agent.

"Oh, yes, I am squinting at them."

"They are a right nice lot of fellers; they wouldn't like to hurt you for the world."

"Well, if that is so, just caution 'em to bear light on those triggers. Better-looking men than I am have been drilled clean through, just by carelessness."

"Oh, they are the most careful critters that you ever saw! There ain't the least danger, provided you don't try any gum-ames."

"Nary game! I don't take any stock in this deal at all; it's none of my funeral."

"Jake, my boy, you have got more good, hard boss sense in that skinny head of yours than any other driver who ever pulled a line in California. But I say, just warn the pilgrims in your hearse that this is business—old business every time! and that if they attempt to cut up any monkey-shines, their blood will be upon their own heads. We are the nicest gentlemen in the world if you give us our own way and don't vex us, but if you rub our ha'r in the wrong direction we turn into the worst set of tiger-cats that was ever seen in this country."

"I'll talk to 'em, but I reckon there ain't any one of them hungry for blood," the driver remarked. "But, I say, my gentle friend, don't be ugly and rush things in too great a hurry, for there's a lady inside the hearse."

"Now, Jake, do you take us for a set of know-nothing galoots?" responded the outlaw, in an injured tone. "Do you think we don't know exactly who we are 'holding up'? Why, you make me blush for your ignorance! It is all on account of the lady that we are coming so gentle at this matter, for our reg'lar way of doing business is to plug the driver and two or

three of the passengers at the first of it so as to avoid trouble. We always get along first-rate with a driver arter we put a bullet clean through him. That is the kind of an introduction a man never forgets."

Despite his coolness, a shiver passed over the driver's frame as he listened to this announcement.

Just open communication with your pards in the hearse and see how they will have it," the man continued. "Ask them if they surrender, and come down gracefully, like Captain Scott's coon, or will they show fight?"

"I reckon they'll play 'coon this time," responded Jake, dryly. Then he spoke to the passengers: "Gentlemen, the road-agents have got us foul, and they want to know what game you calculate to play?"

It was hardly necessary for Jake to ask the question, for every word of his conversation with the outlaw had been overheard by those in the coach—that is, by those who were awake, for the colonel was in a sleep so dense the stoppage of the vehicle had not served to rouse him, nor the urgent punches which the Chinaman, who was only pretending to sleep, had given him slyly with his elbow.

"We surrender, of course," responded the banker.

"Oh, father, what does it mean?" Carlotta whispered hurriedly in her father's ear. "I am sure I know the voice of that man, although he is speaking in a feigned tone in order to disguise it."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense! It is only your imagination," Murdock replied, evidently much astonished by this declaration.

"No, no! The voice is familiar to me, and I have heard it very recently, too!"

During this whispered conversation the driver had conveyed to the outlaw the intelligence of the passengers' surrender.

"There is where they are sensible," he remarked. "It is always better to save trouble and be agreeable when we can."

Then the masked man came directly up to the coach window.

"Sorry to trouble you, good folks, but business is business, you know. I am toll-gatherer on this road, and I shall be obliged to trouble you to get out and deliver. Not you, miss; ladies we always pass free."

The banker and his daughter seemed to be the only ones in the coach who were awake, for neither the Chinaman nor the colonel stirred.

"I suppose there is no use of trying to beg off?" Murdock remarked, with a feeble attempt at a smile, while Carlotta stared at the masked man with all the eyes in her head, as if it was possible to discover his identity through his disguise.

"Not the slightest use, sir, and it would only be wasting valuable time. I'm in no hurry, myself, you know, but my comrades out yonder are deuced impatient fellows, and if I waste much time hyer, talking with you, they will be apt to let drive at the hearse, just for fun. So, you will perceive, under the circumstances, there isn't anything for you to do but to get out and hand over your valuables as speedily as possible."

"Well, if we must, we must," and the banker alighted, took out his wallet and his watch and banded them to the outlaw.

At the first glance at the watch, which was only a plain silver one, worth perhaps ten dollars at the outside, the road-agent shook his head.

"Well, really, Mr. Murdock," he remarked, "that isn't the sort of time-piece a man like you ought to carry, you know. You ought to have a big hunting-case gold one, a tickler worth a couple of hundred slugs at the least."

"It is the best I can do for you at present."

"Oh, I'll take it, so that you will have to get the proper article, for, honestly, it isn't treating us gentlemen of the road right for men of your stamp to be carting round such trumpery time pieces, but as watches were made to go—hey, presto! disappear!" And the man slid both watch and wallet into his capacious pocket. "By the way," he continued, "I never thought to examine but I take it the ten thousand dollars which you are carrying up for the Old Hat Mining Company is not in the wallet?"

The banker started.

"I don't understand what you mean?" he stammered.

"Oh, yes, you do; you understand well enough. You mustn't tell naughty stories, you know, or you will surely go to the bad place when you die. I want the ten thousand dollars you raised in Frisco from the sale of the stock intrusted to you by the Old Hat Mining Company, and which, with a laudable desire to save the Old Hat folks the cost of the expressage, you are bringing up yourself. Possibly you are not aware of it but I am deeply interested in that mine myself and I can take just as good care of that little ten thousand as if you handed it over to the other fellers; so fork out and don't keep me waiting!" and the footpad flourished his revolver in a menacing sort of way.

With a deep sigh Murdock pulled out a large envelope, securely sealed, from a secret pocket in the breast of his coat and handed it over.

"I'm very much afraid if the Old Hat Company don't get this money it will embarrass them considerably," he remarked.

"Well, if the Mining Company goes bust you will have a chance to buy the property in cheap," the road-agent responded, pocketing the valuable package. "The colonel seems to be asleep," he said, turning his attention to the old man. "Just wake him up, please."

But this was easier said than done, for Murdock's repeated shaking did not produce the slightest effect.

"Been up all night, probably, with the boys at Cinnabar. Have the kindness to 'go through' him, Mr. Murdock; that will do just as well."

The banker murmured a little at this but the leveled revolver enforced obedience.

The colonel did not "pan out" well, five dollars in change being all the wealth he had upon his person.

"It is evident the colonel did not expect to run across me or he would have journeyed better 'heeled,'" the man remarked. "But my almond-eyed friend yonder will doubtless make up for it. I heard that he cleaned out the sharps of Cinnabar City in a way they despised last night."

The Chinaman was, apparently, sleeping fully as soundly as the colonel, but when the road-agent took deliberate aim at him with the pistol, he opened his eyes suddenly and jumped out, while his face turned a sickly yellow.

"No savvy!" he muttered, his hand thrust in the breast of his jacket.

"Don't attempt to pull that revolver you have just cocked," continued the road-agent, sternly, "or I'll send your soul to join Confucius in the Happy Land of the Flowery Kingdom. Down with your dust, quick, and no nonsense about it!" and the outlaw, at the muzzle of the revolver, compelled him to disgorge the plunder which he had acquired by his raid on the previous night.

"Tata! See you again some time!" and the road agent retreated to the bushes. "Go ahead, Jacob! Those fellers up there are only dummies. I've done the trick single-handed!"

CHAPTER III.

"ANOTHER MORE POTENT THAN THE FIRST." "HA, ha, ho, ho!" and with a burst of laughter, the outlaw disappeared.

Indigo Jake sat for a moment like one stupefied; never in all his experience had such a trick been played upon him.

"Held up by one man, and three able-bodied galoots in the hearse, too, not counting the Chinaman!" he muttered. "Hang me! if this don't just beat the deck! I reckon the boys

will have the grand laugh on me clear from the city to the Bar when this hyer thing leaks out."

Murdock and the Chinaman resumed their seats; then Jake whipped up his horses and drove on. When he came to the clump of bushes where the supposed road-agents lay crouched, he saw that the bold footpad was right. The men with the rifles were only a pair of old coats and hats, dextrously arranged on sticks, scarecrow fashion, with the sticks so arranged as to look like rifles, stuck through the shrubbery.

The driver halted by the dummies that his passengers might admire the clever contrivance which had answered the road-agent's purpose so well.

"Well, sir, you can take me for a bootjack if this fellow hasn't given us the cleverest deal I ever heard tell of!" the driver exclaimed.

The Chinaman, who, since the departure of the outlaw, had given up his pretended sleep, and had been occupying himself by staring at the banker in a manner highly disagreeable to that gentleman, groaned aloud.

"One man," he muttered, "one man, and he for us go, welly good; me hab pistol, too, and no use 'um; oh, oh!"

Murdock's face wore a puzzled expression as he looked out upon the dummies.

"I don't understand it," he murmured.

"What did you say, father?" Carlotta asked, whose quick ears had partly caught the muttered words.

"I said, I don't understand it—I don't understand how we could all be stupid enough to be caught by such a shallow trick. The ideal! Four of us here, all armed, and yet allowing ourselves to be robbed by one man! Upon my word, it is a most disgraceful thing!"

"Five thousand dollee, one lick, dam!" ejaculated Lee Sing, with a bitter vim.

"Gentlemen, it is the biggest joke of the season!" Indigo Jake observed. "I reckon the boys at the Bar will give it to us hot and heavy for our share in this hyer deal. I don't know how the rest of the funeral feels about it, but as far as I am concerned, I would like to sell out and I would do it cheap, too!" Then, with a "ghlang!" he whipped up his steeds and again the coach went on its way.

Murdock laid back in his corner, his brows contracted and an earnest look upon his face; he was evidently in a brown study, and all the while the heathen watched him from under his half-closed eyelids.

The colonel still slept on, and the girl as she looked at his noble head thought what a pity

it was that such a man should be a slave to the demon liquor.

For about an hour the stage proceeded, nothing occurring to disturb the monotony of the journey.

The moon which rose early had now gained sufficient height to illuminate the face of the country.

About half the distance had been covered, and as the coach rolled out of a long defile into a ragged, broken region three well-armed men rose suddenly from amid the bushes. They were all masked and threatened the driver with their leveled weapons.

"Halt, durn ye!" cried the big, tall fellow in the advance, who seemed to be the leader of the three.

"Halt it is!" responded the driver, pulling up his steeds so abruptly that he forced the horses back upon their haunches. "Well, upon my word if this ain't the biggest kind of a surprise-party!"

"You bet it is!"

"But it ain't anything to the surprise-party that you'll run into in a minute, ho, ho, ho!" and the driver laughed, hoarsely, for the joke appeared to him to be a most excellent one.

The masked men misunderstood his meaning.

"If you or any of the pilgrims inside offer resistance it will be the worst night's work that you ever tackled!" cried the outlaw leader.

"Oh, you needn't be skeered in regard to that," Indigo Jake retorted. "I've got the nicest and most peaceable crowd aboard you ever saw, and as for myself, I'm a reg'lar lamb, I am! Why, I wouldn't hurt a fly! Oh, you can't scare up any fight in this crowd, any more than you could in a Quaker meeting!"

"Wot do you mean then by talking 'bout a surprise-party?" growled the road agent captain, suspiciously.

"Why, my gentle galoot, you are a day too late, that's all."

"Too late?"

"That is what I said; nary rifle will you make to-night. There has been a party ahead of you who has cleaned out the hearse, ho, ho, ho!"

An oath came from the lips of the leader, and a chorus of exclamations from his satellites.

"Ob, it's Gospel truth!" persisted Jake, "and it won't do the least good to swear about it, and if you swear you won't catch any fish. The cuss went for us about six or seven miles back. He was all alone—did the trick single-handed, and it was as neat a job as ever was worked in California." Then the driver related how the road-agent had fooled his prey by the dummy men in the bushes.

The outlaws were astounded; they came together and held a whispered conference, and then the leader advanced to the coach window.

"See hyer, how is this thing?" he demanded, addressing his conversation to the banker.

"What about this yarn of the driver? Is it a sure enough fact that we are a leetle late, and that thar ain't no divy left for us?"

"Yes, sir, it's the truth," responded Murdock, showing by his face that he was sorely troubled.

"We were stopped by a masked man about an hour or more ago, and he made a rich haul, too."

Again a bitter oath escaped from the lips of the baffled robber.

"And a nice set of pilgrims you are, to let a single man hang you up," he cried.

"We were deceived by his cunning trick, and thought there were three men altogether."

"Well, I ain't satisfied exactly in my mind about this, and I reckon I'll have to ask you to get out and walk a little way with us until we get at the rights of the matter. This may be some sort of a skin game on the part of you pilgrims to get rid of paying us our money."

Carlotta was alarmed in an instant for the safety of her father.

"Oh, I assure you, sir, it is the truth!" she protested, "and I implore you not to hurt my father."

"Don't you worry, miss; if this hyer racket has been given to us straight, we won't do any damage to anybody. We never shed blood if we kin help it."

"I'm quite willing to go with you, sir, and give you all the information in my power, and you need not be alarmed, Carlotta; these gentlemen will not harm me without I give them cause, and you may rest assured I shall be careful not to do that."

So the banker got down from the coach and signified to the outlaw that he was at his service.

"Just keep an eye on this hyer hearse," the road-agent leader commanded, addressing his companions, "and if you see any signs of any gum game, plug the hull durned thing full o' holes."

"You bet!" responded the others, in a breath.

"You won't get any chance to make a pepper-box out of me!" Indigo Jake declared grimly.

To a secluded spot, a couple of hundred feet away, the outlaw conducted the banker, and there the two held an earnest conference.

The Chinaman, no longer assuming to be asleep, peered out of the coach window, strain-

ing both eyes and ears to the utmost, so as to ascertain the meaning of this mysterious interview.

The girl was equally anxious, for, despite the assurance of the outlaw, and the confidence of her father, she was afraid that danger might come to her parent.

The driver, too, was a little nervous. Being an old Californian and used to the fiendish methods of the mountain outlaws, he had a suspicion that the road-agents, doubting the story of the robbery, had resolved to put the banker to the torture in order to make him confess the truth, and so he also watched eagerly.

But Murdock's confidence that he would not be harmed was fully justified. The interview barely lasted five minutes, and though both men seemed to be earnest enough, yet they were pacific, but none of the watchers could make out what the two were saying.

At the end of the conference the outlaw leader gave a shrill whistle: the men who "held up" the stage cried, "So-long!" and rejoined their captain. He said a few words to them, then all three waved their hands as a parting salutation to the coach, and plunging into the bushes, disappeared.

"They are going for road-agent No. 1," the banker explained, when he came up. "The chief of this gang thought the story was a sell, but I finally succeeded in convincing him that it was the truth, and he swears he will get even with the other chap if it takes him a month."

Murdock resumed his seat, the coach went on its way and in due time arrived at Shasta Bar.

The excitement produced in the town by the recital of the coach's adventures was great. Never since the town was a town had the citizens so much to talk about, and the more they speculated upon the strange occurrence the greater became their rage and bewilderment.

CHAPTER IV.

A PECULIAR WOMAN.

ALL the town looked forward earnestly to the arrival of the stage on its next trip up from Yreka.

Although Shasta Bar had had a local "habitation and a name" for a little over twelve months, yet such a thing as a road-agent had never been known in the neighborhood; in fact, for a place on the outskirts of civilization, the camp held within its confines as few bad characters as any town of its size in all California.

Singularly free, too, had it been from acts of violence ever since the first pick entered the ground at the Bar. Of course there had been little skirmishes at times, a personal quarrel or two, followed by a "shooting match" in the street, and once in a while a fistcuff encounter, but for all this, as California frontier towns go, Shasta Bar was a regular Sunday-school sort of a settlement.

It was not to be wondered at, then, that the irruption of two road-agent gangs in one night in its neighborhood should create an excitement.

To this purport had Uncle Solomon Rothschild spoken to the usual crowd of loungers who assembled nightly in his store.

Uncle Sol, as he was generally called, kept the large general store at the Bar, where, it was his boast could be found everything from a needle to an anchor.

Some one suggested that the first road-agent could hardly be classed as a gang, seeing that he was all alone.

"You forget his men mid der bushes, der dummies," the old Jew observed, shrewdly. "Der dummies were der gang, and oh, Moses! dey worked well. Mine fr'end, der first gang collared der plunder, and don't you forget it!"

But when the stage got in that evening, on time for a wonder, and the eager citizens surrounded it anxious for news, Indigo Jake was obliged to confess that there wasn't any.

"Ain't seen hoof nor hair of anything bigger than a jack-rabbit this trip."

But if the stage hadn't brought any news of the road-agents, it did convey into the Bar a passenger who was destined to be a subject of much popular interest.

The new-comer was a woman, not young, nor yet old; a woman who might be all the way from thirty-five to forty-five. She was large in stature, splendidly formed, and possessing a face which once evidently had been surpassingly beautiful, but which now was faded by the effect of care and time.

If one could judge by her face she was a woman who had certainly seen much suffering and many hardships. She was ladylike in her appearance and manners, apparently one who had been well brought up and finely educated.

She stopped at the Quiet House, Doctor Johnny Allcash's hotel, the only decent inn the Bar possessed, and after supper she sent for the doctor.

Johnny was a little, round, rosy-faced, jolly soul, the medical man of the district—the "clean white article" and no mistake, as all the town declared.

To the doctor, the lady, who gave her name

as Mrs. Mary Ashford, made known what she required.

"I think of starting in business in this place," she announced, "and I would like to rent a store if there is any such thing vacant in the town."

The doctor reflected for a moment. The town had been going ahead so fast lately that there was hardly a vacant building to be had.

"There isn't anything that amounts to much," he remarked, after explaining to her that Shasta Bar was "booming" just then.

"A very small one will do, even if it is no more than ten or twelve feet square."

The doctor had it on his tongue's end to ask her what kind of a store she thought of setting up, but the lady had a dignified way with her which acted as a damper to curiosity.

"Well, there's a sort of a little shanty that Rothschild built out from the right-hand side of his store; he calculated to run a little saloon there, and in fact did open the place, but the first night some of the boys kicked up such a ruction, just to worry the old man, and broke so much stuff, that he shut it up instant, in disgust at the hull business."

The doctor did not think it necessary to mention that he and the other saloon-keepers of the town were interested in putting the "boys" up to playing a racket on the old Jew as a good joke, and thus adroitly disposed of what threatened to be a dangerous rival.

Before she slept that night the lady had seen the Hebrew and secured a lease of the store, but Rothschild was careful to learn what kind of business she intended to carry on, for, despite her respectable appearance, with the usual suspicion of his race, the store-keeper jumped to the conclusion that she wanted to start "a dance-house with saloon trimmings," as he expressed it, and that would damage his store next door materially.

Next day the lady took possession and all day long was busily engaged in putting it in order, but with closed doors, so that the good people of the Bar, who made it a point of honor to gaze with open mouths every time they passed the place, were not able to satisfy their curiosity in the least.

Night came and still the secret remained undivulged.

Old Uncle Sol was as close mouthed about the matter as though he had been born deaf and dumb.

"Maybe you petter wait und you find out," he suggested to all inquiries.

Next morning the mystery was solved, for the early birds, on their way to get their morning bitters, about six o'clock, were amazed to find that the lady had transformed the little shanty into a *barber's shop*!

The regulation pole with its red and white stripes was stuck outside, and a small painted sign in the window read:

"MRS. MARY ASHFORD.

"SHAVING AND HAIR-CUTTING SALOON."

The first old toper whose eyes met this sign glared at it as though he had never seen the announcement of a barber shop before in his life.

Old Bully Thompson he was called, and he had on a beard that was at least of two years' growth and with a shock of hair in proportion.

Bully was one of the hard cases of the town; he was as good a miner as ever handled pick and cradle, but not a stroke of work would he do as long as he had a cent in his pocket, and now, after a night's debauch, he was crawling along with unsteady nerves to get a cocktail to brace himself up for the day.

A solitary two-bit piece was in his pocket, and as he went along his fingers clutched it as if he was afraid of losing the precious coin.

Two bits meant an eye-opener to steady his nerves, and for which his abused stomach yearned.

But as he stopped before the door of the female barber's shop a wild desire seized upon him. He felt an insatiable impulse to go in and get shaved.

"I hain't had a razor scrape my face fur a dog's age," he muttered. "Durn my cats! if I ain't a'most forgot how it feels to have a feller take yer by the nose and fill yer mouth up with lather. I reckon it won't cost more than two bits. Cuss the cocktail, anyhow! I'll jest show the durned p'ison that it don't own the hull of me jest yet!"

And Bully advanced to the shop. He didn't walk straight up to it, like a man, but sidled toward it, as though afraid that when he got near some one would jump out at him.

But when he got close enough to the door to peep in, he saw that the mistress of the establishment was in the inner room, apparently engaged in preparing her breakfast.

Though small, the shanty was divided into two apartments. The front one was arranged for the barber's shop, while the one in the rear she had fitted up as a living room.

Of course such a thing as a barber's chair was not to be had in Shasta Bar, but by affixing a head-rest to the backs of some common chairs a fair substitute had been provided.

Just on the threshold, with his hand on the

knob of the door, old Thompson's courage failed him, and he was about to retreat, when the lady perceived him through the glass window in the upper part of the door.

Thompson felt that he was caught, and with the courage of despair, hardly knowing what he did, he turned the knob and entered the shop.

"Did you wish to get shaved this morning, sir?" asked the lady, in the rich, melodious voice which more than one love-stricken swain, in the far-off long ago, had sworn was the most perfect of music.

"I was a-kinder thinkin' 'bout it, marm," replied Thompson, making the best bow of which he was capable.

"Walk in, sir, and sit down; I shall be pleased to serve you. This is not exactly San Francisco or New York style, but, of course, up in this wild region we must do the best we can."

"Sart'in, marm, sart'in," murmured the miner, like a man in a dream, taking the proffered chair.

"I suppose, like all barbers, I ought to follow the custom and suggest to you that you ought to have your hair cut also," she remarked, with a smile upon her careworn face, and so sweet that, as the miner said afterward, it seemed to go right to the heart of a man.

"Well, I reckon I would like it, marm, but, the trouble is, I'm 'bout down to bed-rock now."

"I do not understand; I am not used to this mining country, nor to the odd phrases that I hear. I suppose I am stupid, but I really do not know what you mean."

"Why, I am 'bout broke, marm. Two bits is r'ally all I can chip in, and if you ante up any more I sha'n't be able to see the bank and shall have to pass."

"Oh, I see; you do not care to spend more than twenty-five cents."

"Gosh all hemlock! marm, I'd go a five-dollar chunk if I had the dust!" cried Thompson, in a sudden outburst of enthusiasm.

"It is two bits for shaving and four bits for hair-cutting."

"That is what I reckoned. I'm wealthy enough to stand being lathered and scraped, but when you get beyond two bits I am over my head and will have to swim out."

"Well, I will tell you what I will do. As you are my first customer, and I want you to give a good report of my work, I will both shave you and cut your hair for the two bits."

"That's a bargain, marm; sail in!" cried the miner, eagerly.

The lady proceeded to her task, and never in all his life had the man been shaved better or more expeditiously.

Then the hair-cutting began, and a hard job it was, too, for Bully Thompson's locks had not been troubled by the barber's shears for many a long day. In fact, the bowie-knife is the miner's tool for hair-cutting, a trick borrowed from the red-men.

A fair-sized looking-glass was placed before the chair in which Thompson sat, so that he could have a view of the proceeding, and the change which the shaving and the hair-cutting made in his personal appearance was quite astonishing.

As if by magic a half-score of years were lifted from the miner's shoulders and "Old Bully Thompson" looked his title no more; on the contrary, he appeared like a well-preserved man of forty.

"By gosh! marm, durn me if this ain't a heap like a miracle!" he exclaimed, in exuberant glee at the change in his appearance.

"Well, you do look like another man."

"Yas, and somehow, I don't 'zactly understand it myself, but I feel different; if it wasn't for this 'tarnal shakine's I believe I shouldn't feel as if I was more than twenty-five."

"You are nervous," she remarked, noticing that his hands trembled.

"Yas, it's kinder of a way I've got into." The scamp was ashamed to confess that his nervousness arose from a too ardent desire to try conclusions with King Barleycorn and his kindred in single fight.

"I myself am very nervous sometimes, but I have a medicine that generally does me good. You can try some of it if you like; it is valerian."

The miner mumbled something about generally h'isting in a cocktail or two every three or four hours, but after he had taken the mixture which Mrs. Ashford prepared, he was amazed at the instant relief it afforded.

"Wa-al, if that don't beat anything I ever did get hold of!" he exclaimed.

"The scent from it is rather unpleasant—it is so sickish. Take a swallow of coffee; that will remove it."

Then with her own fair hands she prepared and brought him a cup of coffee, and the miner, utterly bewildered by these unexpected events, gulped it down almost at a draught.

"There, now; you will be all right."

"You bet!" he cried, emphatically, recovering the use of his tongue at last. "Durn me if I don't feel jist hunky, and I ain't felt so afore for many a year!"

Mrs. Ashford gazed at him, astonished at the speech.

"Marm, you have treated me jest as if I was

a white man, and a white man I will be from this day out. Old Bully Thompson they used to call me 'round this hyer town, but the galoot that dares to call me so hereafter will get knocked into the middle of next week! See hyer, marm; hyer's the two-bit piece, but I don't want you to part with that 'ere; I want you to keep it, and 'fore the week is out I'll redeem it with a five-dollar gold piece. I want to have that 'ere coin made into a breast-pin, and I want to make you a present of it, and you must wear it for me, marm, jest for luck, and don't you forget it!"

And the miner strode out into the street, astonishing the community by his appearance, and the Old Hat mine chaps by reporting for duty, "gay and chipper as a squirrel and fit to fight for a man's life!" as he declared.

The account of how Old Bully Thompson had been transfigured by the female barber soon spread abroad, and the result was a rush on the part of the citizens to the new shop so great that the place wasn't big enough to accommodate a tenth part of them.

All day long the female barber did a rousing business, and Shasta Bar soberly asked itself how on earth it had managed to exist so long a time without a first class shaving shop.

At night the opposition of the saloons began to tell and the customers gradually diminished.

At last the sole remaining customer was shaved, paid his coin and departed, and the plucky woman sat down, thoroughly tired out after her day's work.

"Thank goodness, the toil is over!" she said.

But, just then the door opened and in stalked another customer—a big, burly, brutal-looking fellow with a fierce black beard—a regular walking arsenal as far as weapons were concerned.

"So you're the gal that shaves the town, eh?" he exclaimed, the bully sticking out in every word. "Waal, you kin try your hand on me. I want my beard trimmed and 'iled and fixed up in first-class Frisco fashion, and I reckon I need a little shavin', too."

"What! I shave you?" the woman cried, springing to her feet, trembling with agitation, for she recognized the man instantly, although many years had elapsed since she had met him. "You would be crazy to trust yourself in my power. If I had you under my hands, the razor at your throat, no power on earth could save your worthless life."

"Wot's that? You wouldn't cut my throat?" gasped the fellow, in amazement.

"I would, so help me heaven! I could not resist the impulse, although I knew that I would be hung for it the next minute."

"Say, you can't give me any such bluff as that!" growled the man; "I won't have it! It's entirely too thin! It won't go down! I have come to be fixed and, blame me, if you don't attend to me I will know the reason why!"

"Go away! Do not tempt me into a crime which I should be sure to repent, although your worthless life has been justly forfeited a dozen times at the least!"

"Will you shave me?"

"No!"

"Take care; I'm ugly!"

"Depart and trouble me not!"

The ruffian drew one of his revolvers, cocked it and took deliberate aim at the woman, who faced him, undauntedly.

"You either shave me or die!" he cried, with an angry, bull-dog like snarl.

CHAPTER V.

THE BULLY OF THE CAMP.

SHE was as pale as death and every nerve quivered with excitement, yet resolutely Mrs. Ashford looked into the muzzle of the revolver that threatened her life.

"I want you to understand that I mean exactly what I say," the rough-bearded stranger continued. "I'll drill a hole clean through you as sure as you are standing on this hyer floor. Do you know who I am?" and as he put the question he scowled at the woman in his ugliest fashion, it being a part of his stock in trade to profit by the terror which his frightful looks inspired.

"You are a bloodthirsty demon for whom the law has been reaching for many a long year," she hissed between her firm-set teeth.

A hoarse growl of rage escaped the intruder, astonished and angered beyond measure at finding himself thus accurately described.

"A demon, am I?" he muttered.

"Yes, and one of these days you will surely get your deserts. So far, for some wise purpose, doubtless an inscrutable Providence has permitted you to go on, almost unchecked, in your career of crime, but the end will come some day, and then you will meet the just punishment due to your many crimes—the hempen rope of the hangman will choke the life from out of your vile body!"

"The blazes it will!" the man almost yelled in his rage. "See hyer, wot do you know 'bout me, anyway? This is the first time I ever struck this hyer camp and how in blazes is it that you have got me down so fine?"

"Depart ere I cry aloud for assistance!" cried

the woman, evading the question, and waving her hand toward the door.

"Depart? Nary a time!" he replied defiantly. "And, as for your yelling, the first yelp that comes out of you will be your last. Why, I would as soon shoot you as I would a jack-rabbit a hopping in my way! I have come into this hyer camp to wake 'em up, and I would jest as soon commence with you as with any one in the hull town. You run a barber's shop hyer and I've come in to be fixed up, and I'm going to be fixed or thar'll be trouble; so you jest put that in your pipe and smoke it! I'm Shanghai Sam; that's my handle! I'm a bad man, and the cuss wot says bool to me, had better be quick on the trigger or he's a gone 'coon! Shang' Sam is a hard knot to tackle and this hyer camp will find it out afore I've been long in the place! I'm a chief, I am, and I'm on the fight, bigger'n a well!"

"You miserable, boasting wretch! steeped in crime to the very lips, and yet so careless of the bloody reckoning that must some day come as to brag of your crimes! Suppose I yield to your threats—suppose I agree to exercise my skill upon you, when you are seated in a chair with your neck bared to my touch and a keen-edged razor in my hands, what chance then would you have for life if I choose to transform myself into a minister of vengeance and anticipate the hangman's work?"

The bully stared for a moment. This was something that had not occurred to him before.

"You wouldn't dare to?" at last he blurted out.

"Wouldn't I?" cried the woman, goaded to desperation by the remembrance of her wrongs, and becoming almost frantic when she thought of what she had endured in the past.

"If you tricked me the boys would hang you to the nearest tree!"

"Hang me, a woman, for simply ridding the world of such a monster as you are?"

The man shook his head in sullen rage. The point was well taken and he could not deny it. In the wild and lawless regions of California the respect paid to the female sex somewhat approaches that reverence with which the knights of old regarded "ladies fair."

And when he came to reflect upon the matter the conviction forced itself upon his coarse mind that the chances were about a thousand to one if she executed her threat the citizens of the Bar would rather regard it as a laudable act than as a crime deserving of punishment.

"Darn my gizzard!" he cried, in wrath, "if you was only a man wouldn't I whale blazes out of you!"

"Hallo, hallo! what's the trouble?" asked a quiet voice, wherein though rung the accent of conscious power, and into the shop walked a man who, for a few moments, had been looking through the glass window in the door observing the scene.

The new-comer was one of those individuals who by their attire plainly reveal the occupation which they follow, when encountered in a frontier town. He was attired in a neat black suit, which, at the first glance, looked like velvet, but was in reality velveteen, a stout fabric well fitted for rough wear. He wore no vest, the better, perhaps, to display the elaborately frilled and ruffled shirt which adorned his person. The shirt had a broad collar of the style to which Lord Byron gave his name, and the black silk handkerchief, knotted tightly around his neck was still further held together by a costly diamond ring, through which the scarf passed.

Contrary to the usual custom of the men who dwell on the borders of civilization he displayed no weapons belted to his person, although a close examination would have revealed that under the folds of his shirt which, after the Mexican fashion, puffed out at the waist over the top of his pantaloons, was a narrow, but stout leather belt; this might be merely to support the pantaloons, but the odds were great that, concealed by the skirts of the coat, the belt carried offensive and defensive weapons.

In a word, the man's dress showed that he was a sport—a sharp, who trusted to the goddess Fortune for a living, not scrupling, however, to sometimes aid the goddess by means of "ways that were dark, and tricks that were vain."

The big fellow turned upon the sharp ferociously. This was exactly the chance he wanted. In spite of all his bravado he did not dare to execute his threat upon the woman, for, although he was ready enough to quarrel with, and try his prowess upon, any citizen of the camp, yet he did not care to rouse the demon known as Judge Lynch, for he well knew if that worthy "got after him," his life would not be worth an hour's purchase.

"Wot the blazes is it your business?" he exclaimed, flourishing his pistol, menacingly. "Hain't you got any better manners than to walk in whar you ain't wanted and hain't been invited, and stick yer snoot in other people's business, you b'iled-shirted son of a mountain polecat?"

"Well, upon my word, you really astonish me!" responded the sport, shoving his hands

into the pockets of the loose sack-coat he wore and actually smiling in the face of the bully.

"Astonish you, do I?" howled Shanghai Sam; "Gol darn yer white-livered gizzard! yer cheat-in', sneakin' card-sharp! You had jest better dust out of this or I'll astonish yer in a way you won't like! Do you know who I am?" and as he put the question he scowled at the stranger in his most awful manner. The bully was a thorough believer in the Chinese art of war, which consists of trying to frighten the enemy with ugly faces and horrid cries before joining in actual battle.

"No, sir; to the best of my knowledge and belief I have never had the disagreeable pleasure of your acquaintanceship; but, you see, the fact is I have just arrived in this town—haven't been here over five minutes, and was walking up the street, kinder taking a look at the lay of the land, when the sign of this barber shop attracted my attention, and as I reckoned a shave would be about the proper sort of thing I made bold to walk in; but I had no idea, general, that you were in possession. I have too high a respect, alcalde, for all men in authority to disturb one of the officials of the town, judge; in fact, if I had known that you were in here, Governor, I should never have thought of venturing to obtrude my vile carcass into your presence, Mr. President."

For a moment the man was speechless with rage and astonishment. He could hardly believe his ears, and yet there was no doubt of it, this "b'iled"-shirted sharp with his white hands and his dainty ways, this fop of a man who had really got some perfume upon his person, if his nose was to be trusted, actually had the impudence to cheek him, the man who had come into Shasta Bar with the firm determination to let the camp see that he was a chief who, when he got upon the war-path, was wont to make Rome howl!

"Waal, cut me into cat-skins if you ain't the craziest cuss that I ever run across!" he exclaimed at last.

"Cut you into cat-skins?" queried the other, with a surprised look.

"That's wot I said; wot of it?" growled the ruffian.

"But it can't be done! It is a clear impossibility."

"The blazes it is!"

"Cert', sure as you're born! Can't cut cat-skins out of a calf, you know."

A howl of rage came from Sam at this insult, and in his anger he leveled his cocked revolver full at the other's breast, and if he had seen the least fright in the face of the stranger—a quiver of his frame to indicate fear, he would have pulled trigger; but there was no sign of trepidation; on the contrary, the man laughed as if it was all a pleasant jest!

"Kinder got the drop on me, ain't you?"

"I wouldn't give two cents for yer life!"

"Well, that would be selling out mighty cheap. Mebbe you ain't well-heeled with ducats now, and that is the reason why you wouldn't be willing to give more."

"You're as crazy as a bed-bug!" Sam exclaimed, hardly knowing what to make of this man who laughed in the face of certain death.

"Sho! You don't say so? Is that sort of a wild animal very crazy? You see, I never investigated the subject, but you must know all about it."

"Why, man, all I've got to do is to pull the trigger to drive a ball right through you!"

"Going to the ball this evening?"

"Eh?"

"Not this evening; some other evening; good-evening!"

Then the exasperated desperado perceived that the other, notwithstanding the terrible situation in which he was placed, was still making game of him.

"By the eternal blazes I've a good mind to fix you!"

"Why don't you do it? You've been fooling around and talking about it for a dog's age, now," declared the other.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"My name, sir, is Talbot—Richard Talbot, erst of Cinnabar."

"I don't know you."

"Yes, that's very true, but in the future we shall be acquainted; this little pleasant passage, Mr.—Brigadier, how may I call your name?"

"Sam—Shangbae Sam, and I am a blood-tub on wheels, and don't you forget it!"

"Oh, no, I shall never forget you while life remains! But, as I was saying—your high mightiness, this little pleasant passage, the formation of our acquaintanceship, will often come back to us when in old age we reflect upon the halcyon days of yore."

"See hyer, you've got too much lip!"

"And you really haven't got enough; you are too bashful—too backward in coming forward; you ought to get over it; a jewel of a man like you shouldn't hide your light under a bushel; high honors are in store for you, but how high depends upon the situation of the limb of the tree to which you are strung up."

"Oh, you're a funny cuss, ain't yer?"

"Well, life is sad enough, you know, and if

we don't joke by the wayside how can we endure it?"

"And you have been kinder joking and poking fun at me?"

"Yes, yes, doing a little in that line, you know, to pass the time away."

"And I've been a kinder joking, too!" the rough remarked, with a savage grin.

"Oh, yes, I know that; any one with half an eye can see you are as full of fun as an egg is of meat."

"I've been playing with you like a cat with a mouse."

"Oh, we've been having a right good time."

"And now if you've got a prayer or two to say, spit 'em out."

"Now I lay me, etc.?"

"Go ahead! In two minutes I'll plug you for all your joking!"

"I'll go you a hundred dollars to fifty that your pistol misses fire! It's a poor tool; I can see that at a glance. Why, I would no more trust my life to such an old cast-iron concern as that than to a broomstick. When you want a weapon in this country you want it bad, and it must be good—like these!"

And before the other knew how it occurred Talbot had drawn a pair of cocked derringers from his pockets and leveled them at Sam.

"You haven't got the 'drop' on me now so much as you had," he remarked.

CHAPTER VI.

A WILD WAGER.

AND how was it that we find the bold Dick Talbot playing his old rôle of the cool and easy card-sharp up in this lonely mountain mining camp?

We must retrace our steps a little and explain the circumstances which had again brought Injun Dick to the front as one of the prominent men in the Mount Shasta region.

Two weeks before the time of Talbot's arrival at Shasta Bar is the period of which we now write.

On the road to the Cliff House—one of the favorite drives of the denizens of peerless San Francisco, in one of the summer gardens, devoted to the sale of the light Californian wines and the amber fluid of King Gambrinus, sat a pleasant-faced gentleman, a man of thirty or thereabouts, whose clear-cut, resolute features, gave evident indication of both courage and intelligence. He was a little above the medium height in size, and in figure most superbly built.

It is now some time since we traced the fortunes of this bold adventurer—for the man whom we have described is no other than Richard Talbot, whose stirring deeds we have already chronicled in a half-score of tales—but time, in the interim, has dealt lightly with our knight, and he has not in appearance aged a particle. His eyes are still as keen, his hand as true, his nerve as good as when we first introduced him to the reader in the pages of "Overland Kit."

Talbot was dressed with his usual neatness, looking every inch the gentleman, and yet the state of his fortunes at this time was at a decidedly low-water mark.

He had just returned from an expedition into Sonora; fortune had not favored the adventure, and when Richard reached San Francisco he had but a little over a hundred dollars to his name.

He had been in the city for a week, uncertain which way to turn, and on this pleasant afternoon had found his way out to the little garden, more for the purpose of passing the time away than for any other reason.

And after he was served with the pint bottle of Angelos port which he had ordered, he began to deliberate upon the situation.

"I can't stay in Frisco much longer," he remarked, discussing the question with himself. "It will not take long for a hundred dollars to make themselves scarce in a town like this, and I don't see any chance to increase my store. I must emigrate, but whither shall I bend my wandering footsteps? That's the question. I want to locate in some nice, little, bustling town, somewhere in the mining region, where there is a good opening for business, but just exactly where to go is what puzzles me."

At this moment three young men rode up to the garden and dismounted—three of the gilded youths of Frisco, as could be detected at a glance—the "bloods" of the town, dressed in the extreme of fashion, resplendent with jewelry and diamonds.

The first to dismount and enter the garden was rather tall, and well-built, with a round, olive-tinged face, fringed with jet-black, curly hair and adorned with a mustache and side-whiskers of the same hue, a decidedly foreign-looking gentleman.

This was one of the best-known men in the city. Leonard De Welcher he was called, a man of wealth and great influence, although young in years. He had made his mark as a politician, also as a newspaper editor; and was, too, a power among the mining sharps and sharks, that hover around the stock exchange seeking whom they may devour.

His companions were two young fellows belonging to the first families in the city—the

tall and slender one known as Gus Bronson, while the short and stout young man answered to the name of Joe L'Anguille.

All of the three evidently had been drinking pretty freely, and yet when they flung themselves into chairs they called loudly for brandy.

Talbot, who was sitting in a rather retired corner of the garden, merely glanced at the trio when they came up, and then had resumed his meditation, but they had surveyed him in an insolent way as though resenting his presence.

The brandy was brought, the glasses filled, and then De Welcher exclaimed:

"Now then, gentlemen, I'll give you a toast! Here's to the bright blue eyes of the queen of my heart, the divine Carlotta!"

"To the divine Carlotta!" the other two repeated, draining their glasses with a gusto.

"You have learned the name of the beauty, then?" young Bronson asked.

"My dear boy, did you ever know me to fail in any undertaking of that kind?" De Welcher demanded. "Of course I have found out all about her! It was as easy as rolling off a log."

"Bravo!" cried his companions, in a breath, and then L'Anguille added:

"You don't mean to say you have made her acquaintance?"

"Well, no; not a regular introduction, I will own, but as far as an acquaintanceship of eyes goes, I have. Glances have we exchanged, and if she does not know I adore her then I miss my guess."

"But who is she? Give us all the particulars, my hero!" Bronson cried.

"Well, her name is Carlotta Murdock, and she is the daughter of a terrier-faced old Scotchman, a banker, or something of that sort, who hails from a little mining camp away up in the North, somewhere in the neighborhood of Mount Shasta, near Cinnabar City, and called Shasta Bar."

Talbot, busy in reflection, had not paid the least attention to the conversation, until the name of his old hunting-ground fell upon his ears; then he gave a slight start.

L'Anguille's eyes happened to be upon him, and he noticed the start immediately.

"Hi, Len, 'ware hawk!" he exclaimed to De Welcher, lowering his voice. "That fellow over yonder is listening to what we say. I saw him start just now. Maybe he is acquainted with the girl or her father?"

"What on earth do I care?" replied De Welcher, loudly, having drunk enough to make him rather long for a quarrel. "I talk to suit myself, and if there is anybody within the sound of my voice who don't like it, the remedy is easy;—let him get out or else compel me to stop!"

Talbot glanced at the speaker in an inquisitive sort of way, as if measuring what kind of man he was; then went on sipping his wine.

"You see, you wrong the gentleman; he hasn't the least idea of listening to our conversation," De Welcher observed, thinking he had "bluffed" the other. "But to resume: this angel of whom I was speaking is the only daughter of this old Scotch banker, and for the last month business has detained him in the city, and to that fact we owe the pleasure of having been treated to a view of this marvelous beauty; but that is a privilege we will not long enjoy, for the old fellow starts to-morrow for his camp."

A series of dismal groans came from the others at this announcement.

"It is too bad, isn't it? It will spoil the fun, eh, boys?"

"Well, I should say so!" L'Anguille assented.

"Most decidedly!" Bronson chimed in.

"That is where you are out of your reckoning, my dear fellows," De Welcher observed, with that air of superiority over his companions that he generally assumed. "As far as I am concerned I had just as lief she would go as not, for I have made up my mind that a little change of air would do me good; then I've some spare cash, too, that I would like to invest in paying mining property, and of course when I invest money in that way, I always make it a rule to see the property in question before I put any ducats into it; so, boys, I'm off for a trip to the North. I'll do Mount Shasta and pitch my tent for a while in this little mining town of Shasta Bar."

"By Jove! old fellow, you must feel deuced sure of the girl!" L'Anguille exclaimed.

"I do!" the other replied, complacently. "She is a beauty, worth the winning, and that is the reason why I am going to take some trouble to get her."

"Just for sport, I'll lay you a hundred that you don't succeed!" L'Anguille bantered.

"My dear fellow, it would be sheer robbery for me to make such a bet!"

"You're afraid to take me up!" replied the young man, whose wits were visibly affected by the brandy which he had been drinking.

"Afraid? Joe, old fellow, any man who has ever been honored by my acquaintance knows I don't understand the meaning of that word. I'll take your bet, and make it five hundred or a thousand instead of a paltry hundred if you like!"

"No, a hundred is all I can afford to risk!"

"Well, you are sensible there, for you are bound to lose. Why, I'll tell you what I'll do; to show you what I dare to attempt, I will bet you five hundred to one that I will kiss her on the open road here, right on horseback, just as she rides along, and then win her after that!"

The others looked astonished at the proposition.

"Oh, you will surely never dare to do that?" L'Anguille declared.

"Take me up and see if I don't dare!"

"Don't you risk it!" Bronson warned. "I know him of old! He's got just enough of Satan in him to make him do it if you dare him to the trick!"

"Money talks! Five hundred to one that I kiss her!"

"I'll take that bet, sir, if you haven't any objection to losing your money to a stranger," Talbot here remarked.

"I was not addressing my conversation to you, sir!" De Welcher exclaimed, hotly.

"I am aware of that, but I took the liberty of speaking in reply to your vaunt. Since your friends apparently are not anxious to take you up, I'll go you a hundred to your five, that is if you mean business, but I reckon you don't, for all your loud talk," Talbot remarked, with evident contempt in his manner and tone.

CHAPTER VII.

A VERY QUEEN.

DESPITE his bravado and impudence the loud-spoken young man was for the moment silenced by Dick's reply. A certain something about this quiet stranger made a decided impression upon De Welcher, but, as he hesitated, he noticed that the eyes of his companions were fixed upon him, curious in regard to how he would bear himself under the circumstances, and this was quite enough to put him upon his mettle.

"When I made the banter I didn't imagine I was throwing it open to all the world."

"Oh, certainly not; still I thought a man so ready to bet, and so eager to give odds, would be glad to find any one to take him up; but if you want to back out—"

"Back out!" cried the young Californian in a rage. "I'd have you to know, sir, that Len De Welcher never yet backed out of anything he proposed to do. All that puzzles me is why you should interfere in this matter. Perhaps you are a friend of the lady?"

"No, sir; I don't know her—never even heard of her; but I am something of a sharp and I never yet met a man going round, eager to get rid of his ducats by trying to make a foolish bet without being willing to accommodate him. As I said before, I don't know the lady, but if she is a lady she certainly will not let you kiss her right here on the open road."

"Of course I am at liberty to use a trick in the matter."

"Certainly; and that also gives me the right to use a trick, too, to beat your little game."

"Yes, I suppose so," assented De Welcher, a little doubtfully.

"You needn't go ahead in this thing unless you are pleased so to do, you know; I don't want to appear to be forcing you into it, although, between you and me, and the bedpost, your little five hundred would come in very handy to me just about now."

"Oh, I'm your man!" the young man cried. "I had just as lief take your hundred as anybody else's. Put up your ducats!" And with a great flourish he drew out a well-filled pocket-book, selected from a roll of bills five one hundred dollar notes and threw them upon the table.

Talbot immediately produced from a secret pocket five twenty-dollar gold pieces and laid them upon the bills.

De Welcher looked at the coins suspiciously.

"Good money, I suppose?" he remarked.

"Oh, no; just like your bills—all counterfeit stuff. I buy 'em by the dozen—dollar a grab, you know," replied Talbot.

De Welcher frowned at thus being played with, but Talbot was as calm and bland as possible.

"Who will hold the stakes?" the young man asked, giving up his attempt to be smart at the expense of his opponent.

At this moment the landlord of the place appeared upon the scene. He was a big, fat German, with a face like a full moon.

"Our friend yonder is the very man," Talbot remarked; "he hasn't any interest in the affair and will give us all a square deal."

This suited De Welcher, so the landlord was summoned, the nature of the bet explained to him and the stakes placed in his hands.

The German was astonished. Although he was pretty well accustomed to the mad freaks of the "curled and spoiled darlings" of San Francisco, he knew that interference would not be brooked, so, with the muttered exclamation: "How mad de poys ish!" he pocketed the stakes.

"By Jove! here she comes now!" L'Anguille exclaimed, happening to gaze down the road toward the city.

All eyes were now turned toward the street.

Along the road at an easy gallop, mounted upon a fawn-colored horse, a beast of rare merit, came as fair a girl as the glorious sun of California had ever shone upon.

She was apparently about eighteen, rather large in stature, giving promise of a magnificent womanhood; her figure, exquisitely rounded, was perfection itself in all its proportions; marvellous was the clear red and white of her complexion, her golden locks, rich and lustrous in their beauty were of that rare hue, so seldom seen, that the old time artists gave to the pictures of the Madonna, the Virgin-Mother; her eyes, quite in keeping, too, with the rest of the rarely beautiful face, were large, full, and of so dark a hue that at the first glance one would be as likely to declare them black as blue, but blue they were; wonderful eyes, fit to tangle up the wits of men and make them forget all the dictates of sober judgment.

L'Anguille and Bronson glanced at each other and shook their heads meaningly after the girl rode by. In their opinion to obtain a kiss from such a lady, in the open street, would be by no means an easy matter, and since their friend had been so foolish as to bet, the chances of the stranger carrying off the funds appeared to them to be extremely good.

"She will ride down the road a short distance, and then, when she returns, I will intercept her, right in front of the garden here, so that you will all be able to see what passes," De Welcher remarked, endeavoring to assume a light and careless air, as though he did not feel the least doubt in regard to his chance of success.

"Dot young man ish a tuyvel!" the old German remarked, under his breath.

"We have just time to take another whack at our host's good brandy, gentlemen," De Welcher continued, "for if she follows her usual custom it will be fifteen or twenty minutes before she returns."

"No more brandy for me!" L'Anguille exclaimed. "I have had enough, and if I were you I should refrain, for you will need all your head to win this wager."

"Bah! brandy to me is no more than so much water; but we'll make it wine since you are so afraid of your delicate nerves," sneered De Welcher. "Give us some fizz, Jan, my boy, and look sharp about it, too, for there may not be much time to spare."

The host hurried away and soon returned with the wine, and again the young men pledged each other, never taking the slightest notice of Talbot, who, however, perfectly indifferent to this fact, was quietly reflecting what a rare piece of luck it was for him to secure the chance to rake in such a sum. And then, too, the affair had decided him where to go.

"This little camp up in the mountains, Shasta Bar," he murmured, "why shouldn't that be as good a place for me to locate as any town I can scare up? Cinnabar City was my old hunting-ground, and the valley of the Shasta seems almost as near and dear to me as the spot where I was born. It will not cost more than a hundred to get my outfit and transport myself and horse up to the camp, and so I shall be able to strike the town five hundred ahead, and with five hundred as a starter, in a new and lively camp, what cannot I do? Who knows? It may be in the cards for me to carve out a fortune yet, up in that wild region lorded over by the peak of Shasta, although, so far, up in that country, fortune has always been pleased to bestow more kicks than halfpence upon me; but it may be in the game for me to come out a winner in the long run. Anyhow, that's the country for me and I'm going, be the luck ahead good or ill."

As will be perceived, Talbot felt morally sure of winning De Welcher's money. He was not at all curious about the "trick" which the blood had hinted he might play in order to secure the coveted kiss. In his "mind's eye" he had laid out a "trick" for De Welcher's benefit which he felt perfectly sure would double discount anything the other might do.

When the wine was finished the young man arose and prepared for action.

"Now, gentlemen, just keep your eyes upon me and see me collar that sharp's little hundred ducats!" he cried, as he mounted his horse—a noble, jet-black animal; then he waved an adieu and rode off toward the city, but after going a few hundred yards he halted and wheeled his horse around so as to be prepared to intercept the lady on her way back to San Francisco.

Hardly was this movement performed when he caught sight of the girl returning.

She was walking her horse now, and De Welcher timed his actions so as to accost the lady right opposite the garden wherein sat the eager watchers.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Murdock, for stopping you upon the public highway," he said, politely raising his hat as he spoke, "but I have a most important communication to make to you regarding your father—something which concerns his very life. If you will have the kindness to incline your head so that I may whisper in your ear, for what I have to say must not be heard by any one but yourself."

De Welcher had maneuvered his horse so that he was now by the girl's side, and as she, totally unsuspecting, but with a look of wonder upon her beautiful features, inclined her head toward him, reining in her steed, that he could whisper in her ear, so certain appeared his triumph that he determined to kiss her ripe red lips instead of her cheek as he had intended.

He bent toward her, a fiendish glitter in his dark eyes.

The sharp report of a pistol rung out on the still air.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FRONTIER TRICK.

Too late, Miss Murdock suspected the purpose of the young man; his lips were just at the point of touching hers when the pistol-shot sounded on the air.

The horses, alarmed by the report, started apart; a gasp came from the lips of De Welcher and he fell forward upon the neck of his steed like one stricken unto death, but the noble brute, instead of bounding away in terror, stood perfectly still the moment it felt the weight of its master upon its neck, as though conscious that some untoward event had occurred.

Cries of horror came from the lips of the two young men, completely surprised by the unexpected occurrence.

Just at the moment when victory seemed within the grasp of the young blood—when it looked as if nothing short of a miracle could prevent the pure, fresh, dewy lips of the maiden from being profaned by the unholy kiss of De Welcher, Talbot had drawn a revolver from his pocket and seemingly in the most careless manner had discharged it, apparently without troubling himself to take aim. Those who have followed the fortunes of "Injun Dick" will remember that in such snap-shots as this Talbot was a marvel.

The German was the first to speak.

"Mein Gott! you have murdered der mans!" he cried.

"Oh, no," responded Dick, rising to his feet, and advancing. "I have only played a little trick upon him, that is all. He is worth a dozen dead men. The fact is, miss," he continued, addressing the astonished girl, "there was a little wager between that gentleman and myself. He was anxious to bet somebody five to one that he could kiss you right here on the open road; I took him up, for I didn't believe that he could do it. He said he should be obliged to use a trick and I told him I was agreeable, provided I could try a trick too, and as you see, my trick succeeded by far the best. He has not kissed you and his five hundred dollars are mine."

The face of Carlotta Murdock flashed crimson.

"It was a cruel thing to make me the subject of such a wager, and I do not know which I most despise—the ruffian who was shot or the bravo that fired the shot!" she exclaimed, and giving rein to her steed, she galloped away at its topmost speed.

"And that is all the thanks a man gets for saving a woman from insult; but when did anybody ever know one of the fair sex to be reasonable or logical?" Talbot quietly remarked.

"You infamous scoundrel, you shall suffer for this outrage!" L'Anguille exclaimed.

"You ought to be strung up to the nearest tree, without the benefit of judge or jury, you vile rascal!" declared Bronson, equally as violent as his companion.

"Are you 'heeled,' gentlemen?" asked Dick, handling his revolver in a business-like way. "If you are, out with your weapons and let the fun begin. The odds are rather against me, but I don't mind it. I will fight both of you at once!"

"Hold on, hold on!" cried L'Anguille, his valor rapidly abating when he beheld this hostile demonstration.

"Take care what you are about! That pistol might go off!" howled Bronson, taking refuge behind a small tree, not big enough to afford shelter to a third of his person.

"In this glorious climate of California when men use such epithets as scoundrel and rascal, they must be prepared to back up their words and take the consequences."

Now, although neither of the young men were cowards, strictly speaking, yet after the proof which they had witnessed of Talbot's skill with the pistol, they were not at all anxious to become engaged in a personal encounter with him.

"The law will hold you answerable for this murder," L'Anguille cried.

"Murder, bah!" Talbot replied, in a tone of contempt. "He's no more murdered than you are. All in the world I did was to try upon him the mustanger's trick, by means of which the finest wild horses are secured. I 'creased' him with a bullet; he's only stunned, that is all. Take him off his horse, lay him on a table, dash plenty of water in his face and inside of ten minutes he'll be himself again."

"He'll make you pay dearly when he does come to!" Bronson remarked, threateningly.

"I shouldn't be surprised if he did try it, but my latch-string is always out. No man can truthfully say that he ever called upon Dick Talbot to step up to the captain's office and set-

tle without the request being responded to promptly.

"Shentlemens, you shall not fight mid dis blace!" the old Dutchman cried, energetically, coming forward as he perceived that there was but small danger of an immediate beginning of hostilities. "I vill call for der bolice!"

"Don't worry yourself; there won't be any further trouble as far as I am concerned. Just hand over that little six hundred dollars stake-money, that I have fairly won, and I'll be off."

The German, only too glad to be rid of the man whom he regarded as a bravo of the first water, shoved the money into his hand.

"Go, and comes mit you into mine garten no more! You hears me, now?"

Talbot laughed, pocketed the money, which he had won so easily, despite the sour looks of the young bloods who would have gladly prevented him from so doing if they had dared, then mounted his horse and rode away.

"Ta, ta! I'll see you later!" he exclaimed, as a parting salutation.

"Dot mans is a duyvel!" averred the old German.

After Talbot's departure the rest turned their attention to De Welcher.

As the victor had said, he was not materially injured, and in a short time recovered consciousness.

Great was the rage which filled his breast, and bitter the oath of vengeance he swore, when he comprehended what had occurred, and the three rode back to the city in a sorry state of mind.

Strange, too, were the thoughts in the mind of the girl, the unconscious cause of all the trouble, as she galloped homeward.

De Welcher she knew by sight, although she had never had a formal introduction to him; but, with the perverseness of youth, she had allowed herself to become deeply interested in him, and now to think that he would dare to make her the subject of such a wager was mortifying in the extreme.

But when she reached her hotel, her father, the old Scotch banker, who was waiting her arrival, made a communication which turned her thoughts into another channel.

She was to start just as soon as she could get ready for her new home in the North, the mining camp of Shasta Bar; and so expeditious was she that in two hours her trunks were packed and she announced herself ready.

The banker, Allan Murdock, was so unlike his daughter in every respect that one could hardly imagine any relationship between the two.

He was a little, dried-up specimen of a man, with a sharp, terrier-like face, half covered with a bushy red beard, which was anything but ornamental. A crabbed, cross-grained, wily, unprincipled man, the world at large said, and yet the girl always had found him a kind and indulgent parent.

Her mother she had never known, being bereft of that parent in her infancy. From her earliest remembrance she had been reared by strangers, her father visiting her only at stated intervals.

When she became old enough she was sent to a celebrated Eastern boarding-school and there remained until her education was finished, and from the school she had come straight to California, so that everything was new and strange to her.

The father and daughter left gay San Francisco that evening and journeyed northward as far as the railroad would carry them, and then took stage to Yreka.

At Yreka they waited a week, Murdock having some mining business to attend to in that neighborhood; then they took the mail-coach up the valley of the Shasta as far as Cinnabar City, where another halt of a week was made.

Shasta Bar was some thirty odd miles from Cinnabar City, up in the wild region once lorded over by the red McClouds, but the tide of civilization had swept the savage warriors before its resistless power, and now there was hardly a red-skin to be found south of the Oregon line.

The only means of communication Shasta Bar had with the outer world was a hack line running twice a week to Cinnabar City, and occupying about six hours in the trip.

This hack ran in connection with the mail coach from Yreka, leaving at two in the afternoon, or when the Yreka coach got in, and as this was generally late it was very seldom indeed the Shasta Bar vehicle ever arrived at that camp before nine or ten in the evening.

And on the particular day when Murdock and his daughter started for their future home, the Yreka coach having met with an accident on the way, it was five o'clock before "Indigo Jake" gathered up his reins, cried "all aboard," and took the wild mountain road which led northward through the old Indian country to the mining-camp of Shasta Bar. The adventures that took place on that trip have already been detailed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHALLENGE.

AND now that we have explained how it happened that Dick Talbot found himself once

again up in the Shasta region we may resume the thread of our story.

The sudden production of the derringers took Shanghai Sam completely by surprise. In fact, with his leveled revolver, almost touching the breast of Talbot, he seemed to hold the life of the sport completely at his mercy. But, for all his blustering, the bully was not of the stuff of which heroes are made, for no sooner did the surprise occur than his presence of mind deserted him, and he risked his life by staggering back, cowed for the moment.

"No, sir-ee, you have not got the drop on me now as much as you had," repeated Talbot, covering the big fellow with deadly aim, yet smiling as pleasantly as though the affair was a capital joke.

"Durn your skin!" growled Sam. "You got me off my guard with your chinning."

"Exactly; and that is the reason I wasted breath upon you, you big, hulking, black-faced scoundrel!"

"What? Do you dar' to call me names to my teeth?" growled Sam, in a fearful rage.

"Do I dare? you overgrown, slab-sided, thick-headed mountain jackass!" retorted Dick. "It don't take much daring to play a game of bluff with any such man as you! You have no more backbone than an eel—haven't got sand enough in all your big carcass to throw in the eyes of a grasshopper! Here you are, fooling around with your revolver at my breast, and yet don't dare to pull the trigger."

"Neither do you dar'," returned the other, sulkily. "I reckon I have got as much sand as you, any time."

"I don't pull because I don't want to murder you in cold blood. I ain't anxious to have the death of even such a ruffian as you at my door; and then, too, there's some poor devil of a hangman somewhere in the world, waiting for a chance to string you up, and do you think I'm the kind of a man to cheat that man out of his job? No, sir; I'm no such hair-pin! You can put up your weapon and get out; I sha'n't hinder you; your room is a deuced sight better than your company."

"I want satisfaction!" growled the ruffian.

"Ain't you satisfied already? I'll be hanged if you ain't a regular hog! Why, just look how your comb has been cut and your crowing stopped. You waltzed in here, bold as brass, the biggest chief that ever set foot in the town. You were going to astonish yourself by being fixed up like a gentleman, or else you were going in for blood and massacre, and when—"

"You're lying now, you know you are!" interrupted Sam, now trembling in his rage. "Let's go outside and fight a reg'lar fight like gentlemen; so stop yer palaver!"

"Oh, I see; you ain't eager to court death, even with the chance of killing your antagonist."

"I want some show for my life! You 'bused me and called me names, and I want you to understand that I'm a gentleman, the hull on me. I'm a chief, too, and I'm on the fight, bigger'n a Injun!"

"Yes, when you succeed in getting all the advantage on your side."

"I don't ask any thing but a fair show. Suppose we go out into the street. You walk up and I walk down; say we walk fifty paces, and then we'll turn and go for each other."

"Oh-ho! I reckon I guess your leetle game. You are a first-class pistol-shot, and you are figuring around for a chance to plug me without incurring any risk yourself."

"Waal, I ain't no slouch with the we'pon, I admit, but that ain't saying that it is a sure enough thing for me to plug you. I reckon you kin shoot some yourself, or else you wouldn't be carrying 'round any sich tools as them things, the likes of which I never seed afore."

"I am the champion pistol-shot of California," Talbot replied, speaking in such a matter-of-fact way and so utterly devoid of any appearance of boasting, that it made the ruffian stare. "You may not believe me, but I never yet met my master with the pistol."

"Oh, you are only trying to skeer me, now, so that you will have a chance to get out of this hyer scrape, but it can't be did! I want satisfaction, and you have got to fight a duel with me like a gentleman!" blustered the bully.

"I'm your man, any way you want to take me, and if I don't cut your comb worse than it was ever cut before, then you can take my head for a football!"

At this point Mrs. Ashford, who had watched all that had taken place with almost breathless interest, thought it necessary to speak.

"Oh, sir, why do you risk your life against this man? It is not an even contest, for you are a gentleman, I am sure, while he is a villain, cursed with the weight of a hundred crimes!"

The ruffian glared at her open-mouthed. He did not remember to have ever seen her before. How was it, then, that she possessed such accurate knowledge regarding him?

"So much the more reason then that he should be either killed or disabled, and so for a time at least kept from dark and bloody deeds."

"You'll need a funeral party to plant you arter I get through with you!" avowed Sam.

"Well, you won't, for no one will take that trouble. Your carcass ain't worth it, and so we'll just throw it out amid the rocks and allow the buzzards and the wolves to make away with it, and if it don't poison them it will be a wonder."

A hoarse growl of rage was Shanghai's only answer.

CHAPTER X.

THE STREET FIGHT.

"Now then, as I don't propose that you shall get 'the drop' on me by any underhand work, just uncock that revolver and put it in your belt," ordered Dick.

"Oh, you want a chance to plug me, without giving me any show to return your fire!" cried Sam, quick to take the alarm.

"Nary time! I will do the same with my weapons; then you can go out into the street and I will allow you five minutes to take up any position you like; then I will follow you and it will be perfectly fair for either one of us to shoot on sight, and we are at liberty to use any and all weapons we may possess."

"Waal, that sounds fair enough," the bully assented, yet with a lingering suspicion that in the arrangement Talbot had so contrived as to secure some advantage.

"Fair and square as they make 'em!"

"We kin use any we'pon?"

"Yes, that we possess or can get hold of; that is understood."

"Mebbe you've got a repeating rifle hid 'bout you somewhars?"

"Oh, yes; down my back; don't you see the muzzle sticking up under my left ear? And I've got a ten-pound cannon in my right boot and a Gatling gun in my left one. I'm well heeled! you can bet all your wealth on that! I give you this warning, so when I go for you in a manner that will make you think all Mount Shasta has fallen on your unlucky head, you will not be astonished."

Shanghai Sam grinned in a sickly sort of way. It was plain from the manner of the other's dress that it was impossible for him to have any larger weapon than a knife or a pistol concealed, yet the undoubted confidence which Talbot entertained in his own prowess was not without its effect upon the brawling giant, but if he "took water" in this his first quarrel in the camp of Shasta Bar, good-by to all ideas of lording it over the town; no "chief" would he be; and as he had come into that region with the idea of making all men admit his superiority, his discomfiture would be his ruin; so he determined to fight now to the bitter end.

"Waal, I'm agreeable," he said, at last, "and to show you that I'm willing to do the square thing, up goes my shooting-iron!"

And suiting the action to the word, he uncocked the revolver and thrust it back into his belt.

Talbot immediately followed suit.

"Five minutes, sir, and then I'm after you, and keep your eyes open, for if I don't upset your apple-cart it will be because I ain't able to do it."

"Brag is a good dog but hold-fast is a better," the other retorted, as Talbot moved away from the door, and Shanghai made his exit through it.

Talbot immediately took up a position by the window in the upper part of the door so as to be able to see where his opponent went.

If Shanghai Sam had confidence in him, the sport didn't have the least bit in that worthy, and considered him quite capable of concealing himself somewhere in the neighborhood so as to be able to fire the moment his antagonist stepped from the door.

And Dick had guessed correctly; this was exactly the game which Shanghai had determined to play the instant he crossed the threshold, but as he halted for a moment, ten steps or so away from the house, and looked eagerly around in search of some ambuscade, the sight of Talbot watching him from the window started him on again.

"Durn the cuss! he's up to the trick," Sam muttered, and with his nose uplifted and an impudent swagger, he proceeded up the street. Fifty paces off a good-sized cottonwood-tree was standing in front of uncle Solomon's store to serve as a hitching-post for the horses of his customers. To it Sam made his way.

"This hyer will do; a right nice leetle fort, I reckon, and if he kin git me out from ahind this fort without me plugging him two or three times, then the devil himself is in the luck that made me run foul of him the moment I struck the town!"

Behind the tree, which was about eight inches in diameter, Shanghai Sam ensconced himself, drew his revolvers and examined them carefully.

"If the durned we'pons don't shoot right up to the handle every time in this hyer scrimmage, that infernal cool cuss may wipe me out, for I'll bet a thousand dollars to a cent he is well-heeled."

The five minutes were up and Talbot advanced from the barber-shop into the moonlight.

A better night for such a street duel could not have been provided. The moon was at its full and riding so high in the heavens that the smallest object could easily be discerned.

Quite a number of people were passing up and down, and though some few of them had noticed the suspicious actions of the big fellow as he examined his weapons, they contented themselves with an inquiring look as they went along; but when Talbot stepped into the middle of the street, in the full glare of the moonlight, facing toward the man behind the tree, and drew a pair of handsome, nickel-plated revolvers from under his coat, it suddenly occurred to the lookers-on that this meant "business."

As for Shanghai Bill the instant Talbot displayed the nickel-plated revolvers, a string of curses escaped from him.

"Heeled—heeled!" he cried, "for all a man's life is worth! You kin bet your bottom dollar, too, that they are seven shooters! Two more shots in his pistles than I've got in mine, without counting that he's got the leetle pair of bulldogs to fall back on. But I'll kill him for all that! I'll kill him as sure as death! I wish I may die if I don't!" he exclaimed, trying to work himself up to the pitch of desperation.

"Hallo! what's up?" called out Johnny Allcash, who happened to come to the door of his hotel, opposite to which Talbot stood, just at that moment.

"Oh, just a little shooting match between myself and that booby, yonder, hiding behind that tree," Talbot replied, and as he carelessly threw up his hand to emphasize his words, all those in the street, thinking that he was going to begin the fun, lost no time in seeking secure places from which they might witness the duel without incurring the risk of stopping stray balls.

Shanghai Sam also thought that Talbot meant to fire, and so in hot haste he blazed away, but the bullet went so wide of the mark that it struck the porch of the hotel, right over Allcash's head, whereat the hotel-keeper ducked and dodged with an alacrity quite astonishing.

"Curse the fellow! he's aiming at me, I believe!" the landlord cried.

"Come out here and stand alongside of me, if you don't want to get hit," Talbot advised.

"No, thank you, but I'll get out of this," and Allcash retreated into the doorway.

The sound of the pistol-shot put every one on the alert.

"Keep the street clear, if you please, gentlemen, and then you can look at the show without any danger!" added Talbot, in a ringing voice.

All who heard the command at once obeyed.

"Come out from behind that tree, you coward!" he cried, advancing slowly, a revolver in each hand.

"Nary time!" Then Shanghai Sam took deliberate aim and fired again.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RESULT.

BUT the bully was either not a good marksman or was armed with a poor weapon, for his first shot had gone wide of the mark, and upon his second attempt the pistol missed fire.

"There! didn't I tell you so?" Talbot exclaimed. "Such cast-iron weapons will miss fire nine times out of ten!"

For answer Sam fired again, and this time the bullet whistled past Talbot's head, within an inch or so of his ear.

"That fellow will blunder into hitting me if I give him time enough. I must scare him a little and put his nerves out of tune," he muttered to himself, and with a rapid motion, never troubling himself, as far as the lookers-on could see, to take aim, he fired both revolvers.

A howl of pain and rage commingled came from Shanghai Sam, and, in his excited state, he fired too quick, but, as a natural consequence, the only harm done was to the hotel porch and to a barrel on the opposite sidewalk, behind which a brawny miner had squatted to enjoy the show, and the way that man retreated to the shelter of the nearest house, swearing at the top of his voice as he ran, was a caution—at which all the watchers yelled with delight.

But when attention was again directed to the duel, at a glance all saw why Sam had been so fearfully enraged. Both shots of his antagonist had taken effect; blood was streaming from each cheek; two wounds had evidently been inflicted, and yet the man seemed to keep his feet as though nothing had happened.

"Well, how do those ticklers feel?" Talbot called out. "I reckon that anybody who sees you after this will know you, for I've put a brand on your face that will last you for life."

A groan of rage escaped Sam, followed by two more harmless shots, although they made a couple of the lookers-on change their "coignes of vantage" in a hurry.

"That makes six shots; now you have only six left, and if you don't use them to better advantage than the first six, why, I pity you, that's all!"

Sam felt a cold shiver run all over him at these words.

"Everybody will know you now; you have Dick Talbot's mark on you—a single straight slash on each cheek. It ought to be done with a knife, you know, but after the bullet wounds heal up the scar that will be left will look just about the same as though the operation had been performed with the steel."

The bystanders looked on in wonder, beginning to realize that they had seen some marvelous shooting. Talbot had sent the balls tearing through the cheeks of the ruffian, producing two painful, though not at all dangerous wounds.

Six more shots! Why might he not compass the death of his antagonist if he could come to close quarters?

And so it came about that Shanghai Sam made a movement which thrilled the bystanders to their very marrows.

With a yell of defiance, like to the war-whoop of a blood-smeared red-skin, he made a rush for his foe.

The lookers-on held their breath.

Ten steps; then a flash of flame from Talbot's revolvers; a bowl of pain from the bully, and down he went, flat upon his face.

"Pick him up and carry him off if he's got any friends. I've only put a bullet through his leg, just to disable him, for I didn't want to kill the brute without giving him time to repent of his evil deeds. Gentlemen, the circus is over," and with a polite bow Talbot retreated to the barber shop, leaving behind him the most astonished crowd of citizens that had ever collected since the town of Shasta Bar had had an existence.

Mrs. Ashford had watched the proceeding through the window in her door, and was profuse of thanks when Talbot returned.

"Don't say a word, madame," he replied; "it is not necessary. I am a very peaceable man and dislike being mixed up in brawls; but if I hadn't taken that loafer in hand he might have hurt some honest citizen who wasn't up to his tricks. But, I don't think he will do much swaggering in this hyer camp. If he tried to play chief, now, there would be a dozen ready to climb him."

"But you must look after your own safety hereafter; he is a bold, bad man, and will not rest until he has revenged himself upon you."

"Ah, madame, there is little danger to be apprehended from a fellow of his stripe after his claws have once been cut," Talbot answered. "I know the breed like a book! It is not the first time I have encountered them; there is a good deal of the dog about men of his kidney; when once they come to know their master, they are not apt to give much trouble afterward."

"Oh, sir, that will not hold good with this man!" she persisted, earnestly. "He is no stranger to me, although he is the last person I expected to see up in this wild region."

"You know him, then?"

"Yes, yes, I knew him years ago, but he did not recognize me, although I did him the moment my eyes fell upon his brutal face. He bore another name when I knew him, and in manner was not near so ruffian-like as he is now, but at heart he was just as bad. I do not think earth bears upon its surface a more blood-thirsty, heartless wretch. I was foolish to betray to him the fact that I recognized him, but I could not help it. I blurted out the truth almost before I knew what I was saying. The remembrance of the wrongs which I had suffered at his hands came up so vividly that if it had been to save my life I could not have kept silent."

"And did he recognize you?"

"No; not even when I denounced him as a wretch fit only for the hangman's hands."

"Well, that's lucky for you, then, or else he might attempt to make you fresh trouble."

"I would not endure further persecutions at his hands!" she cried, spiritedly. "It would be either his life or mine; woman as I am, I should be driven in my desperation to kill him rather than suffer as I have suffered!"

"Well, madame, I think you would be perfectly justified in so doing," Talbot remarked.

"But, as he did not recognize me I have little cause for fear; but you—"

"Oh, don't be alarmed for me, madame," Dick hastened to say. "I have traveled so long in this world, carrying my life in the hollow of my hand, as it were, that I laugh to scorn the malice of my enemies. Openly this fellow will never dare to face me after the lesson I have given him to-night."

"Oh, no, I do not doubt that! It his secret enmity that you have to dread."

"And against that I shall always be on my guard. I have spent years up in this wild region, madame, and I doubt if there is a man living who knows the life better; and if this bully succeeds in catching me napping, why, then, he is a better man than I take him to be and I must pay the penalty for underrating him."

"But you will be sure to be ever on your guard against treachery?"

"Oh, yes; even when I slumber, I always sleep with one eye open," responded Dick, smiling. "And now, madame, may I call upon you to exercise your talents in my behalf? I've

had a long and dusty ride, and I think a good shave will make me feel like a new man."

Mrs. Ashford was only too glad to wait upon the man who had come to her aid, and leaving Talbot under her hands, we will return to the wounded man.

Murdock, the banker, had been one of the witnesses to the fight, and formed one of the crowd who gathered around the senseless man when he had fainted from the shock.

"Hasn't he got any friends?" Murdock asked.

The bystanders looked at each other and there was a simultaneous shaking of heads.

"Well, even if he is a stranger, he ought not to be left here to die like a dog, you know," the banker observed.

"That's so—that's so!" the crowd murmured.

"Take him up some of you and carry him into the hotel; he must have medical assistance. I'll stand the expense if he isn't able to pay."

In answer to this liberal offer the wounded ruffian was carried into the Quiet House.

CHAPTER XII.

A PECULIAR BANKER.

To Carlotta Murdock this trip into the wild mountain country was full of enjoyment. Fresh from the boarding-school in the East she knew but little of the great world by actual experience; nearly all her ideas of life were drawn from the books which she had read, and so when she came to Shasta Bar, and was conducted by her father into the rude, two-storied shanty which was to be her future home, her surprise was great.

The building was about fifteen feet wide by twenty-five long, divided, after the fashion common to the frontier, into two apartments—the front one of which was used for business purposes, the rear for a living room, and overhead were the sleeping rooms.

Carlotta knew that her father had been in the banking business for years, and her idea of the establishment of a banker, was widely different from what she found her father's place to be. No sumptuously-furnished business palace with its mahogany railings, massive desks, private rooms for business consultations, obsequious clerks, with pen stuck behind their ears, great ledgers, filled with figures, and a safe big enough to contain the wealth of a millionaire.

Instead of all this, the miserable little twelve by fifteen apartment only contained a table made of common pine boards—the edges and surface of which bore the mark of many a knife-blade—four chairs, all of them decidedly the worse for wear, and a nail keg, filled with sawdust, which answered for a spittoon.

A door led to the rear room, which was furnished with the furniture necessary for living purposes, but everything was of the plainest description, and not an article was there which could possibly be dispensed with. Near the right wall, in the partition between rooms a small square hole was cut, over which a sliding-panel worked, and under this in the rear apartment, was a rude desk on which was a large blank book, ink and paper, and a small pair of scales. As the girl learned afterward, a pair of scales was a necessary article in all business-houses in the mining region, where gold-dust circulated as freely as coin.

Another odd thing about the banker's abode was a small room up-stairs in which was placed the most miscellaneous collection of articles that the girl had ever laid eyes upon, all of them carefully labeled.

Carlotta, during the brief time she had been with her father, had learned that he mortally disliked being questioned, and so she held her peace in regard to all these things which puzzled her so much, although she was almost devoured by the curiosity that she felt.

What kind of a "banking business" could it be that her parent carried on up in this miserable little town which could not boast of over fifty houses all told?

The place must be thriving wonderfully and its inhabitants making plenty of money to need a banker.

And this much she said to her father, but he replied that a Californian town could not be judged by the same rules as one in the East, and that the place was prospering and the banking business afforded him a handsome profit, taking it week in and week out.

Then he further said to Carlotta that if she had just as lief he would be glad to have her assist him in the guise of a confidential clerk. She was to sit at the desk behind the hole in the partition and do as he directed.

The girl was only too glad of the chance and embraced the offer with eagerness.

This conversation took place about a couple of weeks after Carlotta's arrival at the Bar, some days therefore from the time of the duel in the moonlight, when Murdock had come forward to the assistance of the wounded man.

As Talbot had said, Shanghai Sam had not been badly hurt, and as he had been carefully and skillfully treated by the genial doctor-landlord of the hotel, he had speedily recovered sufficiently to be able to get away, and one night had departed without taking the trouble to say good-by to any one.

It was the belief that Shasta Bar would

never again be honored by a visit from that "chief," who had come in for the express purpose of making Rome howl, but by a reverse chain of circumstances had been made to "howl" himself in a way that was far from being agreeable to the warrior. One person only was skeptical in regard to this—Mrs. Ashford, and she again warned Talbot to be on his guard ceaselessly.

"He will return when you least expect!" she declared. "I know the man as well as he knows himself, and the chances are, too, that he will not return alone. It is his custom to be associated with other wretches as vile as himself, and with their aid he will surely try to injure you."

Talbot thanked the grateful woman for her kindly warning and promised to be alert for all possible danger. In truth he was not the man to underrate his foes, and any one who hoped to take him at a disadvantage must "get up extremely early in the morning."

Murdock had been quite busy since his return to Shasta Bar, and as he had been compelled to be away the greater part of the time, he had not opened his ranch for business, but on the morning after the conversation with his daughter, in regard to her acting as his clerk, he posted her on the high stool, threw open his front door and hung out his "shingle" as a sign that he was ready for business; then he sat down in one of the chairs, put his feet upon the table, after the free-and-easy style common to the wild West, and waited for customers.

And not long to wait, for soon through the door stalked a long-legged, gaunt-looking man, a miner evidently by his dress, who, when he caught sight of the banker, nodded familiarly.

"Howdy?"

"So, so; how's yourself?"

"Mighty poor!"

"That's bad."

"Clean down to bed-rock."

"Pretty rough!"

"You bet it is! Say! hev you got confidence enough in me to lend me twenty slugs?"

"I've got all the confidence in the world, but I'm mighty short of money. You see, I haven't got in running order yet, and the dust hasn't begun to come in."

"Oh, that's the way you allers talk!" exclaimed the man, with an air of disgust. "You won't do it; that is what you mean; and yet we have done a heap of business together—"

"And I always treated you well, Tom, don't you forget that! I always did as much if not more for you than any man you could scare up."

"Well, I'll have to come to it, I suppose," and with a sigh the miner drew from his belt the heavy revolver which he wore suspended there, and laid it upon the table. "Can you give me twenty on that?"

"Oh, I couldn't think of it, Tom. I really couldn't go you more than ten."

"I gave twenty-five for it."

"Yes; but that was when it was new; a second hand weapon, you know, is never worth even half-price."

"Well, gi'n me the ten, for I'm flat broke and must make a raise somehow."

"Will you want to redeem it?"

"How long will you give me?"

"Well, say a month, and that is better than I generally do."

"How much will it cost me to 'come in'?"

"Fifteen dollars."

"All right."

Then Murdock took the weapon, counted out ten dollars and directed Carlotta to make out the receipt, which, when it was finished, he gave to the visitor.

"Come out and have a 'howl?' asked the man, chinking the money in his hand.

"Not now, thank you; some other time."

Then the miner departed. The revolver was ticketed and put away, and an entry of the transaction made in the book.

"Poor man; he seemed sorry to part with the pistol," Carlotta observed. She had watched the transaction with considerable wonder.

"Oh, that was all put on to get the money out of me; if I had let him have the sum without making him put up collateral, that is the last I would ever have seen of it."

"But now, I suppose, he will come at the end of the month and redeem the pistol."

"No, no, my dear; the odds are a thousand to one that he will not, and that is where my profit comes in. I can easily sell the revolver for eighteen or twenty dollars."

Carlotta said nothing, but could not help thinking that this was a very strange transaction for a banker. Her astonishment increased during the course of the next three hours, for some twenty-five or thirty customers dropped in and each and every man wanted a loan, and brought something with him to proffer as security. Some of the strangest things, too. One dilapidated genius produced a razor upon which he craved the loan of two bits, and when the "banker" refused to make the deal, departed with the remark that Murdock would be sorry some day that he didn't make the trade, for when in a fit of remorse he wanted to cut his throat, there wouldn't be any razor handy.

Murdock shook his head as if annoyed, but Carlotta laughed outright; the idea appeared to be so ridiculous. In the near future, though, events occurred which led her to somewhat change her mind upon this point.

"You see, Carlotta, a man has to deal with all classes, and some of the men in this region are the greatest scoundrels alive," the father observed, forcing a smile upon noticing the merriment of his child.

"Well, father, I must say you do the funniest business for a banker!" she averred.

"You must consider that this is a very peculiar country."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GREAT ORIGINAL.

BUT Carlotta was destined to be still more astonished and enlightened that day in regard to the peculiarities of the inhabitants of the mining camps in the Shasta region.

Just as Murdock ended the observation that closes our last chapter into the apartment stalked the best representation of a bumner that even the banker with all his experience had ever beheld.

The man was short and stout, fat-faced, greasy-looking, and clad in garments so patched, and stained, and covered with dried mud of various hues, that the original color could hardly be told, and the high-crowned misshapen hat he wore tilted back on his head, pulled down over his rough and tangled locks, was so comical in appearance that it would have made the fortune of a circus clown.

Carlotta stared, for never before had she seen such a figure, and even Murdock was astonished for this fellow was rather ahead of his time.

"Kin I believe me eyes?" and the new-comer struck a theatrical attitude, threw both hands in the air, and rolled his eyes after the fashion supposed to be peculiar to a dying calf.

"Eh!" and Murdock jumped up, not exactly knowing what to make of it.

"I would not hev believed it, if with me own eyes I hadn't a' seen it! Oh, blessed day! this hyer day, from this time out while memory holds a seat in this distracted brain, will I mark as a red-letter day—a day to be recalled and weeped over—'cos I find you once ag'in, A. Murdock, esquire—my red-hot ole pard!"

"What the deuce do you mean?" cried the banker, beginning to believe the fellow was a lunatic.

"Oh!" and the visitor howled so suddenly and so loudly that the surprise fairly made the banker jump; "this is too much joy! Me distracted brain kinnot endure it; me head reels 'round; I'm gitting shaky on my pins. Whisky! give me a drink of whisky, for heaven's sake, or I'll faint!" and he flopped into a chair in the true stage die-away manner.

By this time Murdock had taken the "size of the man," and rushing into the back room he grabbed a pail which was about half full of water, and, returning, dashed it full in the face of the would-be fainting man.

The remedy evidently was an excellent one, for the recovery was prompt. The bumner was on his feet in a moment, spluttering and gasping, half-choked by the deluge.

"Wot on earth do you mean?" he exclaimed, wiping the water from his face with the sleeves of the flannel shirt. "Is that the way you treat a friend and brother? Do you want to drown me with your dirty water? Don't you know that you put me in danger of a relapse, a-chucking water over a cuss in that way? I hain't had so much water 'round me since that leetle pleasure trip that I took with Noar in the ark."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Murdy, ole boy, my pard of bygone days, is that the way you talk to the man wot used to be to you like a brother?"

"I never saw you before!"

"Hear that, ye kindly skies, and weep!" the fellow yowled; then he sighed as if his heart would break. "He goes back on me—on me, the kind ole galoot wot used to be as close to him as his undershirt. Don't you remember Susanville and 'fifty-nine?"

"Never was there."

"No! Come to think of it, it was down at Marysville, in 'fifty-eight!"

"Wrong again. I wasn't on this coast at that time."

"Mebbe so; my noddle ain't wot it used to be," and he shook his head in a melancholy sort of way. "These hyer dates do bother me once in awhile, but I know you, for all that. I've got a memory that is jest as true as steel for an old pard! I never forget a face or a name, although I'm kinder queer once in a while on dates and towns. And, Murdy, you ole Scotch galoot! when I walked into this hyer town, 'bout an hour ago, I had no more idee of finding you hyer than I had of seein' General Washington; but as I wandered along promisc'us like, I see'd your shingle outside, and the moment I read it, I sed to myself, sed I, 'Chop me up inter bits fur to be made into apple fritters, if hyer ain't the very identical chap that used to be my old side pardner down in Angel's Camp, somewhar 'round the 'fifties?' I pass on dates, you know, pard. Got a pretty good shelling hyer, too, ain't ye? How's biz? Is she

rushing?" And the man assumed a confidential tone, seated himself upon the edge of the table and grinned in the face of the now enraged Murdock.

"See here, I never saw you before in my life!"

"Yer gittin' old, Murty; 'silver threads among the gold,' and yer memory's gitting a leetle rusty. Wot, deny me, the original ole Joe Bowers—the man wot's known the width and breadth of this hyer State? Oh, you're jokin'!"

"Nary time, so get out!"

"Oh, well, I reckon we kin trade if you don't remember me," observed the other with an injured air.

"Trade?" and Murdock surveyed the bumner with a doubtful air, as if he had serious misgivings in regard to his possessing any valuables.

"Yes, that is wot I sed, and that is wot I mean. Oh, I'm business, I am! Old biz, right from the word go!" replied Mr. Bowers, with a lofty air. "You jest ask anybody that knows me; jest put it to the boys at Cinnabar City: that used to be my old stamping ground. Oh, I tell yer! if they don't say I am the clean white article and no mistake, then I don't want a cent! I'm the man to tie to, and you kin bet all yer ducats on that, me noble dook, every time, selah!"

By this time Murdock discovered that he had got hold of a most decided character, and felt inclined to humor the visitor.

"Well, I never had the pleasure of your acquaintance, but I will take your word for it," he remarked.

"Ah, thar, Murdy, old boy, you are out of yer reckoning, but of course a man like you, with the weight of a tremend'us biz on his shoulders, can't be expected to remember every galoot that he runs across, but you an' me were old pards onc't; you kin bet yer life to a chiney orange on that! I kinder disremember the year an' the exact town, but it was some mighty lively town, I am sure of that, 'cos I remember you were doing a regular land-office biz at the time, jest a pullin' in the shekels by the handful, but that is wot you allers do, you know. Jest look at the biz that you have built in this hyer town—jest look at it and weep! Why, as I was telling some of the boys, as we war taking a social snifter together this morning—a sort of an eye-opener, yer know—'another hair of the dog that bit yer'—thar ain't another man that could have done it in the time, an' why is this thusly? Because my ole pard, Murdock, is squar' every time! as squar' as they make 'em, an' I don't keer a continental how you take him. That is what I sed, an' that is what I sticks to! Why, a drove of wild hosses couldn't get anything else out of me!"

"I'm very much obliged to you for your good opinion, but you were saying something about trading."

"That's wot I'm coming to," responded the other, with a dignified wave of his fat hand, which apparently had not been on intimate terms with soap and water for some time. "As I told my pards—they were a gay party of roosters, Murty—jest the kind of galoots that you an' me used to run with in the old time, down at Poker Flat—as I told them, 'tain't every man that I would trust with the title-deeds of sich a valuable mine as my strike this side of Cinnabar City, at Jimplecute Flat, the Spread Eagle lead, but when thar's sich a banker as my old pard, Murdock, around who kin safely be trusted with uncounted gold, nary bit skeered am I. I am a leetle strapped jest now. You see I went in to climb a Cinnabar City rooster at poker t'other night, but things got kinder mixed and he scalped me, and so I ain't so flush as I might be. But I reckon I hold a full hand when I have the Spread Eagle documents in my paw, an' so, Murty, you durned old sinner! I want you to lend me a thousand or two on this hyer mine!" And with a great deal of ceremony the bumner produced some legal-looking documents from a secret pocket inside of his shirt, discolored and dirty as though they had seen hard service, and with a flourish laid them upon the table before the banker.

Murdock sat down and took a look at them while Bowers, from the corner of the table, smiled beamingly upon the banker.

"I don't think I know this claim," Murdock remarked.

"Is that so? Well, hang me! if that ain't really wonderful! I didn't think thar was a man in Californy that warn't posted 'bout it! Why, it was the talk of the hull coast! It's the richest lead that has been struck since the early days of the Comstock. I'm going to git up a company and bond the mine for 'bout half a million."

"I reckon you haven't done anything on it yet?"

"Oh, yes; been a heap done. Why, the furs ore panned out at the rate of a thousand dollars to the ton. You'll find the chemical report of the expert sharps thar."

"I knew an expert sharp once who was fooled with a piece of grindstone and made it run a couple of hundred to the ton. I can't lend you anything on these." And he returned the papers.

"A thousand is too big a pull, mebbe?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, give me fifty dollars till I kin write to me banker."

"Nary fifty, nor five!"

"Refuse yer old pard, five ducks! Kin I believe it?"

"You can; here's two bits to get a drink; get out!"

"You bet!" and Bowers, all smiles, clutched the coin and "got."

A few minutes after the bumner's departure Colonel Wash Perkins made his appearance, evidently in a state of great excitement.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COLONEL'S SUSPICIONS.

THIS was fated clearly to be a day of surprises to Murdock.

The face of the colonel wore a very solemn look, and the banker saw at a glance that he was not under the influence of liquor, a surprising fact, seeing that Perkins, after ten o'clock in the morning usually was under the influence of drink.

"See, here!" exclaimed the colonel, throwing himself into a chair and bringing his hand down with a violent bang upon the table, "I cannot stand this any longer and I've got to come and talk to you, Murdock!"

"Eh?" and a cloud gathered on the banker's brows, while a suspicious look appeared in his eyes, despite his efforts to appear unconcerned; "what is the matter, colonel? What do you want to talk to me about?"

"Why, about that girl?"

"What girl?" Murdock knew well enough to whom the other referred, but chose to seem ignorant.

"That girl with you in the stage."

"Oh, you mean my daughter."

"Your daughter?" and the colonel stared blankly at the banker, as if not comprehending what the other had said.

"Yes, my daughter Carlotta."

"Carlotta? Carlotta?" murmured the colonel, and then he shook his head; "that was not the name."

"Not the name—not whose name?" and a look of seeming amazement appeared upon Murdock's face.

"That of the girl I lost sight of long years ago," responded the other, in a dreamy sort of way, staring up at the ceiling.

"Ah, yes, I see; my daughter reminds you of some one whom you once knew."

"Yes; and do you know, Murdock, I cannot get the idea out of my head that this girl is the same one?" and the colonel bestowed a piercing and suspicious scrutiny upon the banker.

"The one that you once knew?"

"Yes, the very same."

"Oh, that is impossible. My daughter has been at boarding-school, secluded from all the world, ever since she was a little child, so you see, my dear colonel, the chances of your having ever seen her are very small indeed."

"But I never did see her."

"Never saw my daughter? No, of course not; that is exactly what I thought."

"I don't mean that; I mean that I never saw the girl whom I think your daughter resembles," the old man replied, in a gloomy way.

"Why, colonel, you are dealing in mysteries, and I confess I don't understand you."

"Murdock do you ever dream?" the colonel asked, abruptly.

"Dream?"

"Yes, and the dreams so like reality that when you awake you have hard work to persuade yourself that all the fantasy of the vision is not actual reality."

The solemn way in which the old man spoke, plainly revealed how deeply he was in earnest.

"Well, I don't know; I can't say that I am ever troubled by dreams much, and I don't think if I was that I should allow them to make any impression upon me. Hearty suppers have more to do with dreams, good or bad, than anything else, I reckon."

"That rule will not hold good with me, for I don't eat much of anything; for years I have lived almost entirely upon liquor."

"It will be the death of you, too, colonel, one of these days if you don't look out," Murdock continued.

"I am not afraid of that; I am not afraid of death; life has had very few charms for me for the last fifteen or twenty years; but this girl, your daughter; do you know, her face haunts me—and a face exactly like hers has haunted me for years. I don't know what to make of it! And the face always appears to me with a distressful look upon it, and it seems to say, 'I am in peril; for heaven's sake, come to my aid!'"

"Well, this is remarkable; and you haven't any idea who the girl is, eh?"

"Yes, I have," replied the colonel, bluntly.

"I didn't say that I hadn't. I know who she is and why she comes to me; why shouldn't I know? But this is what puzzles me: how comes it that your daughter's face is exactly the same—"

"As the face of your vision, eh? Well, my dear colonel, it is but one of those strange co-

incidences that often occur. I have known of a dozen in my experience equally as strange."

"Murdock, there isn't any doubt, is there?" and the colonel, as he spoke, leaned forward and fixed an earnest gaze upon the face of the banker.

"Doubt! doubt about what?"

"This girl is your daughter?"

"Well, if she isn't I've been badly fooled!" cried the banker, irritably, as if the question angered him.

With a sigh the old man sunk back in his chair.

"Yes, yes, I suppose there isn't any doubt about it. You ought to know, but it's strange how strong a hold this impression has taken upon me."

"Colonel, you will excuse my saying it, but really you are beginning to weaken. You must brace up. Now if you were to go and throw in half a dozen cocktails you would feel like another man. I reckon you have been a little off your feed this morning."

"I haven't drank a drop; the face of that girl has always been before me, and the moment I turned my steps toward a saloon it assumed such a sorrowful expression that for the life of me I couldn't cross the threshold and touch the fire-water."

"That is just what is the matter with you; if you had taken your regular rations you would have been all right. Try a sup of my fluid."

And the banker, rising, went into the back room, and returned bearing a bottle and a glass.

The colonel filled the tumbler two-thirds full of the potent fluid and tossed it off at a swallow.

"There; doesn't that rather brace you up?"

"Oh, yes; I suppose, really, that is what I needed. My stopping short this morning probably put these queer ideas into my head. But now, Richard's himself again!" and the colonel drew himself up with some of his old-time haughtiness. "And now, Murdock, that I have got through with the sentiment, we'll come down to the solid ground of business."

"All right; go ahead."

"How about that ten thousand dollars you raised in San Francisco for the Old Hat Mining Company?"

"Well, as I explained to the Directors, I was robbed of the amount by a road-agent on my passage hither."

The colonel was President of the Old Hat Company and one of the heaviest stockholders in the concern.

"A special meeting was called this morning to deliberate over the matter, and I will tell you, frankly, Murdock, it was the sense of the meeting that you were greatly to blame for carrying so large an amount of money on your person; the money was in bills, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, twenty five-hundred-dollar bills, and, colonel, I beg you to remember it was by express order of the Directors that I brought the money with me. I wrote that I would forward it by Wells and Fargo's express, the moment I made the deal in San Francisco, and the answer came back for me to bring the money with me when I came and so save the express charges."

"Yes, of course; but no one imagined that you were going to bring such an amount as ten thousand dollars with you in the shape of bills; it was expected that you would fix it in a check payable to our order; then if you were robbed payment of the check could be stopped and the road-agent would only have his trouble for his pains."

"Colonel, I will admit, frankly, it was an error of judgment, and if I had it to do over again I would never be guilty of such a blunder; but then, who could foresee such a thing? Why, this is the first time a road-agent has ever appeared in this neighborhood."

"Murdock, the loss of this ten thousand dollars is going to smash up the Old Hat Company."

"It may be recovered, you know. I have already offered a reward of a thousand dollars for the capture of the robber and the return of the money."

"Oh, that money has gone up, Murdock; there ain't one chance out of a thousand for its recovery."

"I suppose it is doubtful."

"The Directors want to try and hold you for it."

The banker smiled.

"My dear colonel, if it was ten hundred, I would try and do something to square the matter, but I can't ante on any ten thousand."

"Why, you hold a power-of-sale mortgage on the plant for twenty thousand!"

"No, I don't; my wife's estate holds the mortgage. I am but a trustee; in fact, colonel, when you come right down to bed rock I am bankrupt and have been for years."

"But if the mine goes to smash you will probably buy it?"

"In the interest of my wife's estate I may have to do it. Of course I must protect the twenty thousand dollars which I have already invested in the property."

"Well, I'll report what you say," and the colonel withdrew, a lurking impression in his mind that he had been conversing with a most accomplished scoundrel, and one who would surely push the mining company to the wall.

CHAPTER XV.

JOHN IS SURPRISED.

LEE SING was busily engaged in his "washee washee shop," as it was commonly called; he had a basket of newly starched clothes by his side and was actively at work in putting the finishing touches upon the garments with a hot iron.

Now the inhabitants of Shasta Bar were not, as a rule, much given to the wearing of linen, and when the almond-eyed son of the Orient first appeared in the valley and hung out the red-lettered sign, so familiar to all who know anything about Chinese laundries, there was a universal expression of amazement, and more than one brawny miner, after a visit to the laundry, and a talk with "John"—all Chinamen are "Johns" on the Pacific coast—so as to be certain that it was a sure-enough thing, delivered it as his opinion that if the "heathen" didn't get right up and dust out of the Bar as soon as Providence would let him, he'd stand a right smart show of starving to death.

But these prophets of evil were wrong in their prognostications. The Chinaman did not "dust," he staid; he did not starve, but prospered like the fabled green bay tree.

It was amazing the amount of washing which the inhabitants of the Bar managed to get together weekly, after the heathen had set up his temple in their midst.

And after the Chinaman had been settled in the town for a month or so, the impression became general that he was making a pretty good thing of it, being a prudent, economical sort of fellow, who lived upon almost nothing, and was wise enough not to waste money upon drink; so the idea occurred to some of the sharps in the town that if the Chinaman could be induced to try his luck at cards a small-sized bonanza might be tapped.

Most of the California Johns are sad gamblers, but Lee Sing seemed so simple a heathen that these sports reckoned he would fall an easy prey. A party was therefore made up one night for the express purpose of revealing to the innocent mind of Lee Sing the delights of the scientific game of poker.

"No savvy 'Melican man's leetle game," he had at first protested when pressed to play, but at last he allowed himself to be persuaded and the result was, by the most blundering kind of good luck, as it appeared, he "cleaned out" the entire party!

Again and again was the scheme tried and always with the same result. Let the sharps play as shrewdly as they might, and cheat in the most unblushing way, when the game wound up John inevitably had corraled all the money.

At last a light dawned upon these luckless sports; the Chinaman had been playing them for all they were worth at the game he "did not understand," and it soon got to be rumored around town that there wasn't a man in California who could down the heathen in a fair fight at poker. When this became known the gamblers fought shy of the heathen, but when bant red upon his skill and questioned as to how it was that he always won, he would smile in his unmeaning way and reply:

"Me dunno; me play allee samee 'Melican man."

But on this particular evening—it was night and a candle was burning on the table by his side—Lee Sing was not in his accustomed good spirits. Thoughts of the unceremonious way in which he had been robbed by the masked man upon the trail rankled in his mind; the idea that he should be able to go in among the sharps of Cinnabar and spoil the Egyptians of that noted town to the tune of five thousand dollars and then have the plunder wrested from him at one single blow was keenly annoying. He had had a loaded revolver, too, inside the loose tunic he wore, and had succeeded in cocking it, but, as we have recorded, the quick ears of the outlaw had detected his purpose and had made him quickly change his mind.

"Me no good," John muttered, with mournful accent and a doleful shake of the head. "Me say shoot allee timee; time come, no shoot, no ante, thlow up hand, pass out."

At this point the Chinaman's meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Talbot. The eyes of the heathen sparkled as he noticed the finely-ruffled shirt his caller wore, and he mentally wished that there were ten or fifteen more like it in the camp for the good of his business.

"How are you, John?" Talbot accosted, nodding in his pleasant way.

"Pletty good—how you?"

"Fine, sir; fine as silk!" Then Talbot helped himself to a convenient stool, sat down and looked around him with such a peculiar expression upon his face that Lee Sing, ever suspicious, took alarm at once.

"No good—cleaned out—two bits buy all I hab."

"Ah, John, you are not a classical scholar or you would know that suspicion ever haunts the guilty mind—that the thief doth fear each bush an officer!"

"No, John t'ink each bush a thief."

"Good! that isn't badly put for a heathen," confessed Talbot, with an approving smile; "but I was looking about me for the purpose of being sure that no one would overhear what I have to say to you."

"Plenty, all lound!" cried Lee Sing, with a comprehensive sweep of his hands, perfectly satisfied now that his visitor meant mischief and eager to show him that there was assistance within hail.

"Yes, yes; but there isn't any one in here, is there, who can overhear what I say? Don't be alarmed; I don't mean to do you any harm; on the contrary, I come expressly to serve you."

Lee Sing grinned, but it was the grin of unbelief, and he moved in a very significant way to where a huge revolver lay upon his work-bench.

"Now, John—my dear friend John—don't you lay your hand upon that weapon, or I shall be compelled to plug you so quick that you will never know what hurt you until you arrive on the borders of the eternal world, and Confucius, when he takes you by the hand, gives praise to my bullet which sent him another loyal subject."

Lee Sing looked for a moment into the eyes of the speaker, and realizing that, despite his jocular tone, the sport would be as good as his word, he quietly sat down upon the other stool, perfectly resigned to his fate. He hadn't much to lose, and he concluded he had better submit to the loss than by resistance put in peril his life.

"Now you are sensible, my boy, but I don't intend to do you any harm, upon my honor," Talbot explained. "In fact, I have come to do you a service, as I said before."

"How?"

"Fact! You were cleaned out the other night in the stage between here and Cinnabar City, I hear?"

The Chinaman groaned.

"It hurt pretty bad, didn't it, John?"

"Five t'ousand dollee, ugh!"

"Well, that was a sizable pile; and then, after this first fellow went through the coach, if I heard the story rightly, a second party came along who would have skinned you if the first man hadn't performed the operation to the queen's taste!"

"That's so, you savvy!"

"John, can you keep your tongue between your teeth if I tell you something?"

The Chinaman nodded.

"You will not give it away, as the boys say, to anybody?"

"Nol me good Chinaman!"

"Well, John, I have been commissioned by a friend of mine to pay you five thousand dollars."

The under-jaw of the Celestial dropped, and for a moment he sat and stared at Talbot as though he did not understand his words, then slowly he stammered:

"Five t'ousand."

"That is the exact sum, and here it is. Hold your hands," and Talbot took from his pocket a well-known buckskin bag that Lee Sing recognized as his property, and tossed it into the Chinaman's lap.

With trembling hands the Washee-washee untied the strings and emptied the contents out into his apron.

The identical five thousand dollars which the road-agent had taken from him in the stage-coach were there—not a coin or bill missing.

"Well, is it all right?"

"Heap light," and in the gratitude of his heart the Chinaman selected a five hundred dollar bill and tendered it to Talbot.

"What's this for?"

"All light; fetch 'em back, go you five hundred."

Talbot laughed and pushed the bill away.

"No, no, John; I don't charge anything for my services," he said. "The only thing about the matter is, I want it kept quiet or it may make mischief for me. I don't want you to go and blurt all over town that you have got your five thousand back again; it won't do you any good and might do some one else considerable harm."

"Me no say a word!"

"That's the talk! I shall consider it a bargain," observed Talbot, rising. "And I tell you what it is, you may think yourself deuced lucky my friend took away your plunder, for if that second gang had got their clutches upon it, nary dollar would you have ever seen again!"

"Say! many t'ings like this!" and he pointed to the ruffled shirt.

"Oh, yes, a few."

"Me washee for you and no charge; you savvy?"

"All right, John, I'll see you later!" and Talbot, laughing, disappeared.

CHAPTER XVI.

CARLOTTA QUESTIONS.

AFTER the colonel's departure Murdock fell into a brown study for a few minutes, and as he mused he tapped the table with his fingers in a vacant, mechanical sort of way, a sign with him that his mind was actively employed.

"I half believe the colonel suspects my little game," he said at last in a low, cautious tone, communing with himself, after the fashion common to some men who trust their secrets to no one but themselves. "As the holder of this mortgage I can call upon the mining company to pay me twenty thousand dollars on the first of next month, and if they don't pay I can bring the concern under the hammer, and in the event of an auction sale, as I know all about the property, I can afford to pay more for the mine than any one else. In fact, there is not likely to be much competition; there never is in a forced sale up in such a region as this; the men who are acquainted with the property and know about what it is worth, never have the funds necessary for the investment; my little twenty thousand claim has got to be squared, of course; I want cash and will not accept anything else, and I reckon it will bother anybody, no matter how many friends they have got, to raise twenty thousand dollars in this country at short notice. If this ten thousand dollars had come safe to the treasury of the company they could have pulled through. Of course it is rather odd the money should have been stolen just at this time, but I am sure no one can say with truth that it was my fault. I have been the financial agent of the company ever since it started, and I challenge the world to find one single instance in which I have not been square and above-board in every particular. Of course, this road-agent affair is bad for the Old Hat folks, just at this particular time; but, as I said to the colonel, it is an error of judgment only; no criminality can possibly attach itself to me. It is deuced unfortunate for the mine company. I feel sorry for them, but if they go to the wall there isn't any reason why I shouldn't buy the concern out as well as any one else. The men who lose the mine will, probably, make considerable talk about it; perhaps declare that I wrecked the concern, but I can't help that; I didn't take the ten thousand,"—and the banker made a grimace at this point; "nor do I know who did. The fellow who got away with the cash was a genius and it looks as if he knew others were on the same lay, but, how on earth he discovered I had the money is a mystery, for I was careful not to mention the fact to a single soul, not even in San Francisco, when I got the cash, for fear some rascal might hear of it and send on word ahead so that his confederates in the mountains could go for me. It is a most mysterious circumstance how it leaked out, for the fellow knew I had the money as well as I did myself. Anyway, though, they can't attach any blame to me. I was careless but not criminal, and as to trying to hold me for the amount, why, I laugh at the idea, and so will every one else if they persist in the notion. Clearly, then, in spite of that infernal, rascally road-agent getting away with the ten thousand, which was not a part of the programme, everything has gone on well, and I think I may safely calculate that, inside of six months, I shall be the sole owner of the Old Hat mine, which is as good a bit of property, when put in running order, as can be found in all this Shasta region."

The day wore away without anything more happening worthy of mention. Carlotta did not speak of the colonel's visit and Murdock felt certain she had not overheard the conversation.

But she had heard it all—every word of it—and a deep impression the old man had made upon her.

After supper the banker went for a walk.

He did not return until about ten o'clock, and then, when he sat down to enjoy a cigar before going to bed, Carlotta took advantage of the opportunity to speak about the subject which had occupied her mind to the total exclusion of everything else.

"Father, what in the world did that strange old gentleman mean to-day by saying that my face haunted him?" she asked, abruptly.

Murdock was taken by surprise, and hesitated for a moment, ostensibly to knock the ashes from his cigar tip, but really to collect his thoughts before he replied.

"Well, my dear, I don't know exactly what he meant," he said, at last, "and I don't really believe that he knew himself. You see, Carlotta, the colonel is a very strange man. A very fine gentleman—one of the old school decidedly, but a man so much given to liquor, that it is almost safe to say that he hardly draws a sober breath from the beginning of the week to the end."

"It is so strange, and he is such a noble-looking gentleman, too," she observed, thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes; a very fine man in every respect; even his worst enemy would find it difficult to say anything against him, excepting that he is too immoderately fond of liquor. The trouble with him this morning was that for some reason he had neglected to take his drinks as usual:

and when a man indulges in liquor to excess and keeps up the habit for any length of time, he becomes a perfect slave. He must have the stimulant or else he breaks all down. There is a disease, you know, a species of insanity, produced by excessive indulgence in liquor which is known as delirium tremens, and when anyone is so afflicted he is commonly said to have 'the man with the poker' after him, because in his frenzy the sufferer imagines he is chased and his life threatened by all sorts of horrible things; a furious ruffian with a red-hot poker pursues him; rats appear in his path and snakes coil around him. For the time being the afflicted man is positively crazy about these things; he will talk and act rationally enough, except when the snakes, rats, etc., come in; then he becomes perfectly rabid. I think the colonel had a slight attack of this disease this morning, which is the reason why I pressed him to drink something. When a man becomes a slave to liquor he cannot break off all at once and stop drinking without danger. Your face troubled the colonel; he had seen it in his dreams; it haunted him. You resembled some one whom he confessed he had never seen, and of whom he had no knowledge. You perceive, my dear, how loose and disjointed his talk was. His mind was really affected; I thought so as soon as he commenced; and if he had gone on—if I hadn't given him the liquor, he would have very soon begun to see snakes and rats and all sorts of horrible things. It is a frightful disease when it takes a firm hold on a man."

"Oh, it is terrible," Carlotta murmured. "That is about the right word—it is terrible, and the colonel is sure to have it if he keeps on drinking or if he stops suddenly. The only way he can escape is to gradually stop the liquor; still drink, you know, but take less and less every day, until he weans himself from the habit; but that is something I never expect to see. It is very hard for an old toper, like the colonel, to give up the habit when it is once fastened upon him. Liquor will kill him in the long run, and judging from this exhibition to-day I should not be surprised if the end was pretty near."

"You think, then, that his idea about my face being familiar to him is nothing but fancy?"

"Nothing else in the world, my dear, nothing but pure imagination, the coinage of the brain; no doubt about it."

"What a pity he should be so afflicted; he seemed to be a noble man; was he a colonel in the regular army?"

"Oh, my dear, no one knows about that. You mustn't go by titles in California. Because a man is called a judge here, that doesn't imply that he has sat upon the bench, or even practiced law. Somebody called our friend colonel when he first came into this region and the title stuck to him, but it doesn't show that he has ever seen service anywhere. And in this region one can't be sure, even, in regard to men's names. This is on the very edge of civilization, you know, remote from courts and officers of the law. Many of the men in camps like this are fugitives from justice, sheltering themselves from pursuit under false names; and in this region, too, no man ever questions the appellation of another, for it would be treading on dangerous ground. It is a queer community—a bad place to live, but a good one to make money in, and when I have succeeded in accumulating the sum I desire I shall speedily get out and return to civilized life."

Murdock, when he had entered, neglected to bolt the door after him, and at this juncture it was opened, a man entered, rapidly, closed the door behind him and bolted it.

The new-comer was a tall, muscular-looking fellow, with long black hair, shaggy and unkempt, and a beard so huge that it completely hid all the lower part of his face, as the old slouch hat pulled down over his brows did the upper.

Murdock was on his feet, revolver in hand, in an instant.

CHAPTER XVII.

RESTITUTION.

"Hol' on, hol' on, pard!" cried the stranger, in a gruff, hoarse voice, evidently assumed for the purpose of disguise; "look out fer that shootin'-iron; you ain't got no call to pull on a feller!"

"Well, I don't know about that!" retorted Murdock, sternly, still menacing the man with the cocked revolver.

Carlotta had also sprung to her feet at the entrance of the stranger, but the instant he spoke a look of intense surprise appeared upon her face.

"But I know 'bout it!" the man replied; "durn my old boots! you'll let that pop-gun hustle itself off the furst thing you know. You ain't much used to handling we'pons, 'cos you ain't one of the boys, and if you ain't keerful you'll plug me, sure'n blazes!"

"It would serve you right for coming in the way you did! What do you mean by this intrusion, and how dare you bolt the door after you?" the banker demanded, sure that this was a bold attempt at robbery.

"Durn it all! I ain't intrudin'! I hev come to see you on business—strictly business, you bet! and I jest shoved the bolt so that we wouldn't be disturbed," with a grin.

"Well, you had better shove it back again, and I must say you select a queer time to come upon business. Wouldn't the day do as well for you?"

"Nary time! But I say, for the love of goodness do be keerful of that we'pon; she'll spill herself all over me, the first thing you know."

"You had better get out!"

"W'ot? Without tellin' of my biz arter all the trouble I've had to get in?"

"Oh, I understand your little game well enough, but it will not work. I've got the drop on you and I give you fair warning that if you don't get out I'll sock a half-a-dozen pills into you."

"Don't you do it! I ain't hankering arter any sich medicine. Honest! I come on business!"

"I don't doubt that, and the business is to plunder me, but you can't do it, and as your game—"

"That ain't my lay at all!" the man interrupted. "Why, I would be a fool to try that, when a single yell would bring a dozen to your assistance. No, sir; honest Injun! wish I may die if I haven't come to do you a service."

"A service?" and Murdock looked surprised, while Carlotta, slightly bending forward, her scarlet lips parted, the breath coming quickly between them, was regarding the stranger with the utmost attention.

"A service, boss," the man repeated; "that is what I said and that is what I mean. A right down, up and up service—the kind for to make your eyes start out of your head with joy, and that is the sort of a rooster you will find me to be! All I ax is for you to be keerful with that son of a gun you have got thar! Don't let her sliver without fair warning, for I ain't anxious to make one of a funeral-party if I've got to ride in the first carriage."

"You are not in any danger, sir, unless you attempt violence, and if you do, I give you fair warning I will shoot you with as little mercy as I would extend to a mad dog."

"Violence! w'ot do you take me for! Why, Murdock, old boy, I am just as gentle as a kitten if you only take me the right way."

"Come, sir, your business! Explain what it is, immediately, or else get out!" exclaimed Murdock, impatiently.

"Sart'in! I will explain in the wag of a mule's tail! You were in the coach t'other day coming up from Cinnabar, when it was stopped by a road-agent?"

"Yes, I was."

"And you were robbed?"

"Correct."

"A lot of your private plunder and a package containing ten thousand dollars which you were fetching up to the Old Hat Mining Company?"

"Yes, sir, that statement is quite correct."

"Well, now, Mr. Murdock, I am goin' to say something which no doubt will strike you as being mighty strange. After the road-agent went through the coach, which he did alone and single-handed, and the stage went on its way, a second attack war made upon it."

"Yes," replied Murdock, a peculiar expression upon his face.

"The second attack did not result in any plunder for the simple reason that there wasn't anything left, the first man having made a clean sweep."

"That is the case, sir, exactly."

"A result that astonished the road-agents, for they had expected to corral the ten thousand dollars belonging to the mining company which you carried."

Murdock looked amazed.

"It seems to me, sir, that you possess surprising knowledge concerning this matter."

"Oh, yes; I am pretty well posted, thanks to a friend of mine, who has got the inside track. And now, banker Murdock, I come hyer, acting as the representative of that friend, and I want you to give me your word that you won't attempt to take any unfair advantage of what I am about to tell you. I'm going to put you in possession of the inside history of this 'holding up' of the coach, and if you were disposed to be ugly you might trouble both myself and the party I represent."

"Of course I don't know what you are going to say; it may be that I would be foolish to give such a pledge," Murdock demurred, still perplexed.

"Oh, no; that isn't the case at all, as you will see when I explain. But all thar is to the thing is, if you don't want to give the pledge, why, I will git out and let matters stand jest as they are."

"Well, under that assurance I will agree to pledge myself to secrecy, and whatever you may confide to me I will agree not to use to the disadvantage of either yourself or your friend," the banker replied.

"Now you are talking! and I will git right down to solid business so quick that it will make your head swim!" the unknown exclaimed. "Jest you open your ears now as

wide as you kin so as not to miss a single word and I will tell you how it was that the job came to be put up on the coach. In the first place, my friend, who did the trick, is not in that line of business at all; he isn't banking for fame as a road-agent, and he only went into the affair to accomplish a certain object. It came to his knowledge that three scoundrels had planned to rob the coach, up from Cinnabar City, with the intention of securing a valuable parcel which you carried, you understand, the ten thousand dollars belonging to the mining concern. My friend only came in possession of this information about five hours before the time fixed to do the job. As you will see, the thing was kinder rushed upon him. There wasn't much time to deliberate about the thing. Whatever there was to be done had to be done quickly. My pard is a stranger up in this region, and so he reckoned that if he took a hand in the game he would have to 'play it alone,' and when he came to put on his thinking-cap he came to the conclusion that the easiest way for him to beat the road-agents was to go in first and rob the coach himself, which he did."

"Yes, and I must remark that, for an amateur, it was a remarkably fine performance," Murdock observed. "In fact, I much doubt if any old stager could have worked the trick better."

"Wa-al, he did the best he knew how, and when a man does that he can't do any better, you know; but, to bring the yarn right smack up to an end. My pard robbed the coach in order to save the plunder."

"I see; took the money himself to save it from getting into the hands of the other rascals."

"Exactly; but thar was this difference between his little game and the plan they was going to work: if they had 'held up' the stage it would have been good-by to all the valuables, but as it is, everything is safe."

"Safe!" and Murdock stared.

"That's w'ot I said and that is w'ot I mean!" Then from his pocket he took the wallet, together with the watch and chain taken from the banker, and laid them upon the table. "How's that for high? But hyer is something that is a leetle higher," and by the side of the other articles he laid the sealed packet containing the ten thousand dollars in bank-notes which Murdock had been bringing from San Francisco to the Old Hat Company!

Murdock was so astounded by this remarkable transaction, that he could only stare, a most peculiar expression on his face.

"Thar's the plunder jest exactly as it was when my friend, owing to the force of circumstances, was obliged to relieve you of it, but you see if he hadn't done it, the other fellows would have got it. The money in your wallet is thar to a cent, and the ten thousand dollar package has not been opened, as you will perceive. Oh, I tell you, Mister Murdock, my pard is squar' as a die. Nary man in the coach will lose a red! Even the Chinaman has got back his little five thousand, although most men would think it no sin to skin the rat-eater."

"I am very much obliged to you for your trouble, for I understand that you are the man who did the trick," the banker remarked, strangely abstracted, considering the circumstances. "Come, can't you oblige me with your name?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WOMAN'S WIT.

"Oh, no; w'ot good would that do? You've got the plunder back all right; the thing is all fixed up squar' now, and w'ot more do you want?" and the stranger commenced to retreat.

"Stay a moment!" Murdock cried, and the man halted, as if to hear what he had to say. "You haven't any idea how greatly my curiosity has been excited by this strange affair. I have been a good while in California, but this beats anything I have ever seen or heard of. It was ingeniously arranged, and carried out in the boldest manner. I feel sure you are the man who did the job. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the great service you have done me, and am truly anxious to know who you are, so that one of these days if I should be in a position to return the favor I may be permitted that pleasure."

"Ah, Murdock, you do sling the taffy with a lavish hand when you commence," replied the man, with a laugh. "But it won't do, you know; I have reasons for wishing to keep my identity a secret, and whether I am the man who did the trick or not, I don't see that it matters so long as I don't reveal who I am, so I'll say so-long, and git."

"Stop, if you please, sir!" now interposed Carlotta, abruptly.

The man turned to her in surprise.

"You have done my father a great service," she said, "and I do not think it right for you to depart under a misapprehension."

"Eh? W'ot on earth are you driving at?" he questioned.

"You think you have disguised yourself so carefully that your identity is not even suspected; but it is not so."

"Wa-al, miss, if you, or anybody else, can

guess who I am, I will own that it rather beats my time."

"I suspected who you were the moment you stopped the coach and I heard your voice!" Carlotta declared. "Your voice is not a common one; I only heard it once, but it was under such peculiar circumstances that I shall not be apt to forget it for many a long day, and the moment you spoke, although you tried to disguise your tones, I felt sure I knew you, although you were the last man in the world whom I expected to see. And now my suspicions are confirmed, and I am sure I am right. I recognized you on the road when I had not the least idea you had left for San Francisco, but I saw you in the street here, the other night, learned your name, and, of course, now it is easy for me to get at the truth."

"Upon my word, this is all very mysterious!" cried the banker, gazing first at his daughter, and then at the disguised man.

"You are doubtless deceived by some resemblance, miss; you and I have never been acquainted," the unknown demurred, evidently ill at ease.

"Oh, yes we have! you may not call it an acquaintance, but I do, although an unusual one. You cannot cheat me by juggling with words. I know you well enough, Richard Talbot!"

Murdock started; was it possible that this unknown friend was the daring sharp who had so astonished the citizens of Shasta Bar by his skill and bravery?

The visitor was silent, evidently perplexed by this confident assumption of the young lady.

"You see, he is silent, father!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I know I am right. I was sure I knew you in spite of your disguise, and I did not think it right, after you had performed such a service for my father, that you should go away with the idea that you were not known."

"Miss, there is an old saying that a willful woman will have her own way, so I suppose thar isn't the least use for me to contradict you. If you are sure you are right, it will not be perlit for me to say you are wrong. All I ask is fer you not to say anything about this whether I am the man you take me to be or not. You can simply say that the plunder stolen from you on the road has been returned; brought back by a chap in disguise, who wished to keep his identity a secret, and that is all thar is to it. You gave me your pledge to keep the matter quiet, and that is all I ask; good-night to ye!"

Then the caller unbolted the door and went out into the night.

"A most mysterious affair," Murdock remarked, seemingly not rejoiced to recover the stolen property. "But how comes it that you know this Talbot?"

The girl explained how it was, but with evident confusion, for she could not think of the subject without feeling annoyed. She did not, however, relate all the particulars of the affair. She merely explained that, while out riding one day, a young man presumed to accost her, and that Talbot interfered and saved her from rudeness, if not insult.

"A regular knight-errant," Murdock observed, with something like a sneer upon his face. "Protecting women from insult and interfering to prevent road-agents from seizing their prey! Why, the days of chivalry have come again! The only trouble about it is that such noble, knightly deeds are not appreciated in this degenerate age, and the chances are that if he keeps on in this career, a bullet will put an end to his existence. Take the passengers in the coach the other day for instance;—we were just as likely to show fight and shoot him, masquerading as a road-agent, as though he had been a road-agent in reality. It was a risky game he played, and if he is not careful he will play it once too often, some time."

Carlotta was perplexed by her father's words; he spoke just as if he was annoyed at what had been done. She could not understand it, for although she had her own reasons for a little feeling of ill-will toward Talbot, yet had to admit that he had acted like a hero and gentleman.

"The fellow is a regular dare-devil," Murdock admitted. "Any one who witnessed the affray the other night must come to that conclusion. He is a man whose enmity I should not care to provoke."

"But there is no danger of such a thing happening, father," the girl asserted. "I am sure he has acted in the most friendly manner toward you."

"Yes, there is no doubt of that, but I am puzzled to guess why he should so trouble himself. Why should he expose his life and all for the sake of doing me a service? He is an utter stranger to me; I never saw or even heard of him before, and few men ever put themselves out of the way to oblige a stranger without some strong reason for it," and as he spoke the banker cast a glance at Carlotta in which suspicion was strongly written. But she, perfectly innocent, never for a moment suspected that her father thought Talbot's great and sudden

interest in his affairs had ought to do with herself. "Haven't you any suspicion why he has interested himself in my affairs?"

The girl was amazed, and Murdock began to think he had wronged her by his suspicions.

"No, father; why should you think I know aught of the matter?"

"You know this Talbot; and I do not, and I thought it possible he might take such an interest in you as to lead him to assist me."

Carlotta now understood what was meant, and a bright blush crimsoned her face.

"Oh, father, you mustn't think I am actually acquainted with this person, for I am not!" she protested. "I never saw him but once, the time I told you of, and then I didn't speak half a dozen words to him."

"Well, I didn't know, my dear; you take after your mother in being very beautiful, and I thought it possible that you had made a conquest of the dare-devil."

A look of scorn appeared upon Carlotta's face.

"The idea is absurd, father!" she exclaimed, annoyed more than she cared to tell by the supposition. "I hope when I do make a conquest it will be of a different kind of man. Surely I will not have to cast my lot with that of such a desperado!"

"Heaven forbid!" cried the banker. "No, no, my child; such a thing can never be! Our sojourn in this place will not be long. I am just waiting to make one grand coup and then we will be off to the East, leaving these wild scenes and wild men far behind us. But this affair is very mysterious and the more I think of it the more puzzled I am."

"It is very fortunate, though, that you have recovered the money."

"Yes, more fortunate for the Old Hat Company than for me, for my personal loss only amounted to a trifle, while the ten thousand dollars will help the mining folks to pull through—if they have luck." And there was a peculiar emphasis to the last words which puzzled the girl, but as she was so ignorant of all business matters she did not question her father further.

"By the by, there's a little duty I must attend to," announced Murdock, taking his hat.

"I forgot all about it until now. Carlotta, take charge of this ten-thousand-dollar package. Don't be frightened! no one knows it is here so there is no danger of robbers. I will turn it over to the company in the morning. Bolt the doors; I will not be very long absent, but I must go as it is a matter that will not admit of delay."

He went forth, leaving Carlotta to her own reflections, and the thoughts which came surging through the young girl's mind were conflicting in the extreme.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANOTHER MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR.

ABOUT twelve o'clock on the night of the events just related Colonel Perkins and Red Bill Smith, both of them a little the worse for their potations, entered the shanty occupied by the two in common, which was at the edge of the town on the Old Hat Mining Company's property.

Red Bill was one of the prominent men of Shasta Bar.

Mr. William Smith, called Red Bill on account of the color of his hair and beard, was superintendent of the mine, and the original discoverer of the property. Smith bore the reputation of being one of the best prospectors—as the men who make a business of discovering valuable deposits of precious metals are called—that ever smelled out a lode in California. He had been working on "grub stakes" when the Old Hat strike was made, Colonel Perkins being his partner.

"Working on grub stakes," in mining parlance, is when one man finds the money for the prospector to live on, and supplies tools, etc., while he is searching for hidden lodes, and in return receives an interest in all the discoveries.

Perkins put up the money, Smith located the mine, Allicash bought a third interest, and the three composed the Old Hat Mining Company.

But as the mine was a difficult one to develop, the company was obliged to raise money by mortgaging the property, as the owners had not the requisite funds. In order to meet the mortgage they had put shares on the market, on which Murdock had succeeded in raising ten thousand dollars as previously related.

Perkins and Smith kept bachelor's hall, and had just come back to their quarters.

Both felt pretty blue, for the colonel, after his interview with Murdock, had gone straight to his partners and related to them the unsatisfactory particulars, and also unfolded to them his suspicions that the banker would be a pretty hard creditor when the time of settlement arrived.

Entering the shanty, Smith lit a candle, and the two sat down to take a final drink, as a night-cap before retiring for the night.

A small parcel wrapped in an old newspaper, lying upon the table, attracted the colonel's attention.

"What's this, Billy? Something you have been buying?"

"I haven't bought anything. I thought it belonged to you."

"Nary time! I don't know anything about it."

"No more do I."

"Well, that's queer. How did it get hyer? The door was locked, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Durn me if it ain't mysterious."

"Let's see what it is, anyhow!"

And the colonel proceeded to examine the parcel.

Removing the newspaper disclosed a small buckskin bag, such as miners usually carry to hold their money.

"Hallo!" cried Perkins, amazed; "why, hang me! if it don't look exactly like the bag that the road-agent relieved me of in the coach the other day. The hull thing was a mighty strange affair. You see, Bill, I had been up all night, helping the Chinaman to skin the boys at Cinnabar City, but I didn't feel particularly sleepy until I took a drink from Murdock's flask, and then I'll be hanged if the whisky didn't fix me so that I couldn't keep my eyes open. In spite of myself I went into the deepest kind of a slumber, and didn't wake up until the coach got clear into the Bar, so that I didn't know anything about the coach being stopped until the rest told me about it, then I examined my pockets, and, s're enough, my money was gone."

"Pears to me you said they didn't strike you heavy."

"No, only about five dollars."

By this time the colonel had emptied the contents of the bag upon the table, and a cry of amazement came from his lips.

"Well, I'll be eternally hanged if this don't beat my time!" he cried. "Why, Bill, this is my bag, sure enough, for here's the very identical money that I had in it. I remember exactly what coins I had, and here they are. See that Mexican dollar with two holes in it? I remember that distinctly."

"What's that bit o' paper?" Smith asked, referring to a little square of folded writing paper that looked like a leaf from a memorandum-book.

"Don't know; that ain't mine, but I'll soon see."

The colonel unfolded the paper, ran his eyes over it, and then cried out:

"Just open your ears, old man!" and he read aloud this communication:

"MY DEAR COLONEL:—Permit me to have the pleasure of returning to you the plunder that was taken from you in the Cinnabar coach the other day. The whole thing was a plant on the regular road-agents who attacked the coach an hour or so later. The coach was stopped and the plunder taken so that the gang who had planned to rob the stage should be fooled."

"Nary signature," observed the colonel, when he had finished reading the note.

"Well, may I be durned if this don't beat anything I ever heard of, sure as ye'r born!" Smith ejaculated.

"Say, Bill!" cried the colonel, abruptly, "this same fellow is the one who got away with the ten thousand dollars."

"That's so!"

"And if he has returned my ducats—"

"Oh, no, colonel; that is too much to expect!" Smith rejoined, with a sorrowful shake of the head. "Five dollars a man might give up, but when it comes to ten thousand—why, Perkins, there isn't more than one man out of ten thousand who wouldn't hang on like grim death to such a sum if he got his paws onto it."

"You wouldn't!" asserted the colonel, in rather a severe tone.

"No, I s'pose not; I never hanker arter what don't belong to me."

"No more do I; and, somehow, I've got the idea that the writer of this hyer note is just as square a man. He's got the pluck of an honest man, anyhow."

There was a knock at the door, and both the men started.

"Colonel Perkins—Smith! are you in? Open, it is I—Murdock!"

For a moment the two stared at each other across the table, and with a whispered, "I'll bet you a cool thousand I was right," the colonel got up, opened the door and admitted the banker.

"You must excuse a visit at this untimely hour, gentlemen, for I come upon most important business," Murdock said, after entering and closing the door carefully behind him.

The colonel looked at his partner with a glance as much as to say—"Didn't I tell you so?"—then he offered the banker a chair, saying:

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Murdock; you are welcome at any time; we are late birds, hyer, and seldom go to roost until after midnight."

"So I supposed," replied the banker, seating himself, "and felt pretty certain I should find you up. Well, gentlemen, one of the most mysterious things has happened to me—one of the strangest occurrences—in fact, if I didn't know it was so I never would have believed such a thing possible."

"Odd things do happen sometimes, and I am beginning to believe that this is just about the

region for such things. Smith and I have been kinder astonished to-night, ourselves," the colonel remarked.

"Oh, but this isn't any ordinary occurrence; it is something entirely out of the common run. It is just as romantic and improbable, gentlemen, as anything you ever read in fiction. You know the ten thousand dollars which I was bringing up from San Francisco to your Mining Company, and which the road-agent wrested from me when the coach was robbed?"

Both of the others nodded assent.

"Well, gentlemen, that money is now in my possession," and Murdock proceeded to relate the particulars of his interview with his mysterious visitor.

When he had finished the colonel handed him the note which had been in the buckskin bag.

"Oh, oh, I see; you were in a measure prepared for my intelligence, then," Murdock remarked.

"Yes; we were jest a-talking about the matter when you came," Smith answered. "The only pint I was doubtful upon, was whether after the cuss got his books upon such a grand haul as ten thousand, he would be apt to give up the plunder."

"Oh, I've got the money all right, and I would have brought it up to-night, if I hadn't been a little afraid to risk traveling around the camp at this late hour with so large a sum in my possession. Once caught, twice shy, you know, gentlemen."

The others nodded; a great weight had been taken off their minds by the intelligence.

"But in the morning, gentlemen, I shall be glad to pay it over. Suppose I meet you at the hotel at nine o'clock—how will that do?"

"All right; we'll be on hand," the colonel declared.

"You can just bet we will!" Smith added, emphatically. "Oh, we're just hungry for that leetle ten thousand."

"And I shall be heartily glad to get rid of it," Murdock remarked, rising. "At nine in the morning; good-night!"

"Good-night!" they cried, and away Murdock went through the darkness, unheeding the shadow-like form following closely in his footsteps.

CHAPTER XX.

MANY A SLIP 'TWEEN CUP AND LIP.

AFTER the departure of the banker from the miner's cabin, the colonel and the superintendent warmly congratulated each other.

"I tell you what it is, Bill, this has been a mighty close shave," the colonel observed. "The loss of this ten thousand would have busted us, sure'n thunder!"

"Oh, no doubt about that, and 'tween you and me and the bed-post, colonel, if the company should go bust it would lay me out flat—'n a pancake!"

"I should be in the same fix, Bill, for all I've got in the world is in this hyer mine. Johnny Allcash, seeing that he has the hotel to help him out, might stand it, but we two should go to eternal smash."

"Well, I don't know 'bout that, colonel; Johnny ain't so durned solid as you think; he was very much under the weather to-night; I never saw the little cuss so blue before, and he let out to me that he was in a pretty considerable big hole. You see, he's been speculating in some other directions lately, and he ain't struck plum-center, every time. He as good as told me that if the mine went up it would bust him, and he didn't rally see how he was going to pull through."

"Say! let's go down and tell him that everything is all right!" exclaimed the colonel, abruptly. "It's pretty late, I know, and maybe we'll have to rouse him up, but I tell you what it is, Bill, if he feels about this matter anything like the way I do, he'll be mighty glad to see us."

"All right; let's git!"

"Sartin; but, I say, Bill, take a look at your weapons. It is late, and a very dark night, and since that road-agent business there's no telling what scamps may be around."

The precaution was a wise one, for in the average mining-camp the man encountered after the midnight hour is much more apt to be a foe than a friend.

The partners, however, reached Allcash's hotel without encountering a soul. No one appeared to be abroad, and the camp was like a deserted village.

The hotel was closed for the night, as they had anticipated, but the pair found no difficulty in getting in, for Allcash had not yet retired.

The landlord did not appear at all surprised when he ascertained who it was that demanded admittance, but conducted them at once to his private apartment, where he requested them to be seated and brought out some liquor for their entertainment after the hospitable fashion of the Pacific coast.

"Kinder of a late hour to make a call, Johnny," the colonel observed.

"Oh, that don't make any difference," the landlord replied, in a gloomy way, strangely different from his usual mood. "The fact is, gentlemen, I s'pose you are like myself; this infernal business is just worrying the life and soul

out of you. I don't believe, pards, that I shall sleep a wink to-night. This is the worst streak of luck that I ever run into, and it comes mighty hard, too, for this ten thousand would have pulled us through and then we all had a fortune in our grasp."

"Mighty rough," responded the colonel, solemnly, and at the same time winking at Smith.

"The toughest deal I ever heered tell on!" added Smith, "and that is what fetched us down hyer to-night. You see, the colonel and I have been talking the matter over, and as we have come to the conclusion that we are pretty well played out, clean down to bed-rock, in fact, and with nary chance visible for any of us to strike pay-dirt ag'in, the best thing we kin do is to gi'n the camp a treat."

This speech was delivered in the most sober way—not a sign to indicate that Smith was joking.

"A treat!" cried Allcash, surprised; "I don't understand you; what kind of a treat?"

"Something to make the boys open their eyes, you know—something for the town to talk of in the future, when it gits to be a very big place, a second Frisco; something that will carry our names down to posterity and make the Old Hat Mine and the three pards that were busted by it remembered for ages to come."

"What in blazes do you mean?" cried the landlord, beginning to lose patience.

"To astonish the camp. We're busted men, without any more use for this hyer world; so the colonel and I have made it up. First, the colonel is to swallow you, then I'm to swallow the colonel, and then turn inside out and swallow myself, and if the boys don't put their shoulder to the wheel and gi'n us a funeral that will overlay any bearse procession that ever took place in Californy, then this camp ain't the hang-up place I take it to be."

Allcash fully looked the disgust he felt.

"Well, gentlemen, it may be cussed funny, but I don't see it!"

"You ain't going to let such a little thing like ten thousand dollars trouble you?" the colonel suggested.

"Bosh! If you are short, call on me! I'll give you a check for it any time!" Smith superadded.

"Hang me! if I don't believe you are both crazy!" averred the exasperated doctor.

"Sartin we are! sure as you're born!" Smith replied. "Crazy with joy; but, Johnny, we won't fool with you any longer. The leetle ten thousand is not gone up!"

"Nary time!" Then the colonel related the interview with Murdock, thereby lifting the load which had weighed so heavily upon the heart of Allcash.

"It is the most astonishing thing I ever heard of in all my life!" he declared. "Now I understand what was the matter with the Chinaman to night. He's been groaning 'round town about the loss of his money ever since he was robbed; wouldn't play, wouldn't drink—you know he takes a quiet snifter once in awhile—in fact, went 'round like a bear with a sore head, but to-night I noticed that he appeared like himself again; he was 'bucking the tiger,' and dropped about a thousand dollars at faro before he got through."

"He got his plunder back, you see, just as Murdock and myself did," the colonel explained.

"It beats me! I never heard of anything like it before, but that ain't material; the main point is that the money is safe," the landlord assumed.

"That is it—that's the pint, and we'll have the funds in our hands here to-morrow at nine o'clock," Smith announced.

"He is to meet us here to-morrow morning at nine and pay over the money?" asked Allcash.

"Yes, that is the arrangement."

"Well, gentlemen, I suppose you will think I am a jackass for saying it, but I wish you had arranged the matter differently."

"I don't exactly understand you, Johnny; how arrange it differently?" Perkins asked.

"Well, gentlemen, I should have wanted to collar that money the moment I heard it was safe. I should have said to Murdock, 'We'll go right with you; you can pay it over to-night and then the affair will be off your mind.'"

Smith and the colonel looked at each other.

"Well, we might have done that, of course," Perkins admitted.

"But, Johnny, don't you think that would be kinder rushing matters?" Smith asked. "We have always found Murdock to be a good, square man; thar never was anything wrong about him until this hyer road agent business, and then, while I admit that he was blamed foolish to carry the money with him, yet it was only one of those stupid things the smartest of men are apt to do sometimes, and that the coach should be robbed was something no one could foretell."

"I tell you what it is, gentlemen, 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' and 'There's many a slip between the cup and the lip.'"

"What are you driving at, Johnny?" Perkins demanded.

"Gentlemen, that ten thousand dollars is altogether too much money to be lying around

lose; it is our money—it is in the town and we ought to have it. Gentlemen, I don't want to blame you, but I think you are too easy with this man!" declared the landlord, earnestly. "I tell you, frankly," he continued, "ever since this road-agent business I don't have the least bit of faith in him. He may be all right, but I don't want to take any chances; I don't take any more chances worth ten thousand dollars on any man. If the money is in the camp I think the quicker we get it into our hands the better. Gentlemen, don't let us wait until nine o'clock; there's no telling what may happen between now and nine—let's go for the money now!"

"Now?" exclaimed the colonel.

"Kinder queer time," suggested Smith, "and it will look, too, as if we didn't trust him."

"Well, I don't for one, and I had just as soon tell him so to his face, too," persisted the doctor. "I tell you what it is, gentlemen, I had made up my mind that Murdock is one of the men who works in the dark. I suspected that he wanted to wreck the company for the sake of getting hold of the mine, and until I get my fingers on that ten thousand dollars I sha'n't be able to get rid of the idea. I say, go for the money now! If both of you oppose me, why, you are two against one, and of course the majority rules."

"But, Allcash, if you feel this way about the matter I hate to oppose you, although I confess I wouldn't bother about the thing to-night," Perkins remarked.

"I'm in exactly the same box," supplemented Smith. "But, colonel, so long as Johnny feels as he does about the matter, hang me if I want to go ag'in' him. Anyhow, there's no harm in being on the safe side!"

"Not a bit," Perkins coincided.

"We'll go then, gentlemen?"

"It is your say-so."

"All right! That is the lead I am going to play!"

Five minutes later the three were on their way.

The house of the banker was only a few steps, and soon they halted at the portal.

Smith drew one of his revolvers, and with the butt rapped loudly on the door.

No sound came from within.

Again the miner rapped, making almost noise enough this time it would seem to rouse the dead.

Not the slightest answer came, nor could any one be heard stirring within.

Allcash groaned.

"He's bolted, by heavens! bolted with our ten thousand dollars, curse him!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A FRESH DEVELOPMENT.

"BOLTED!" echoed Smith; "bolted with our ten thousand! Do you really think that's possible?"

"Oh, no, boys; I can't bring myself to believe that," the colonel demurred.

"What is the matter, then? Why don't he answer?" demanded Allcash, trembling with nervous excitement.

"Mebbe he's a sound sleeper, and we hav'n't woke him yet," Smith suggested.

"Batter away at the door then; kick the infernal thing down!" cried the landlord. "If he is in the house we must have him up. But he ain't, gentlemen; he's gone; you can bet your bottom dollar on it."

"No, no; I can't believe it. Murdock himself might be able to take French leave and get off between two days, but he couldn't very well carry his daughter with him without exposing himself to the danger of recapture," the colonel assumed.

"If he's in the house, I'll start him!" Smith exclaimed, and he banged away at the door with so much violence that the noise awoke the neighbors all around.

Men in scanty costume appeared at the doors and windows, and nearly every one flourished some kind of a weapon, "in the alarm of fear caught up," while a chorus of voices demanded to know what was the matter.

"We want to see Murdock on important business," explained the colonel, then the old Jew store-keeper, who always retired with about all his clothes on, recognizing the colonel's voice came forward with a lantern.

"Mine gootness!" he ejaculated; "Mister Murdock must sleep like der deat! Mine friends, you make noise enough to scare de town!"

"I don't think he's in the house," Allcash declared, his face now white with emotion.

"Oh, yesh, my tear; he ish. He bid me goot-night and went into der house just after twelve. Why, my tear poys, dot ish not much more as an hour ago."

"Did he say anything about leaving town?" Allcash demanded, never thinking in his excitement that if the banker had been going to abscond it was not likely he would proclaim his intention in the open street to the first comer.

"Going to leave der town?" repeated old Solomon, surveying Allcash with a curious eye, and immediately coming to the conclusion from the strange looks of the landlord that he was

very much under the influence of liquor. "Mine gootness! what foolishness is dis you makes mid me?"

"No foolishness at all! Why can't you answer a civil question?" retorted Allcash, who had arrived at that state of mind when he was ready to quarrel with anybody about almost anything.

"Mine gootness! mine fri'nd, I am de most civil mans in der town!"

"Why don't you answer the question I asked, then? Did this thief of a Murdock say anything about leaving town?"

"Oh, come, Johnny, that is pitching it a leetle too strong, you know!" the colonel interposed, while the bystanders looked at each other in wonder.

"To-morrow?" questioned Solomon.

"No, to-night; did he hint that he was called out of town by important business to-night?"

"No, no, mine fri'nd! All he said to me was, 'Goot-night; I am so tired as never vas, and I go right mid me to mine bed.'"

"Of course; that was his game!" Allcash cried.

"Going right to bed, awfully tired. That was to throw dust in your eyes. He went in the front door to go to bed, then went out the back one and vamosed as quickly as possible. Oh, boys, you can bet your bottom dollar he is well over the range by this time and this hyer camp will never see hide nor hair of him hereafter!"

"We are doing a good deal of chinning but not much work," Smith averred. "And I reckon we won't know much of anything 'bout the matter if we don't get into the house."

"We had better break in the door; the man may be sick or dead," the colonel suggested.

"There's his daughter; if there's anything the matter with him, why don't she answer?" demanded Allcash, thoroughly convinced that his theory was right and that all the rest were wrong in their surmises.

"Better break open the door; that will settle the matter," proposed one of the bystanders.

"S'pose you try der back door, poys?" advised old Solomons. "Mebbe you finds some-tings dere," and without more ado all trooped around to the back door.

Allcash was in the advance, and the moment he reached the door, he hit it a violent whack with the butt of his revolver, and, to the surprise of all, the door instantly flew open.

"By the everlasting furies!" cried Allcash, almost beside himself with excitement at this discovery, "you see how it is! The bird has flown—the cage is empty—and the best thing we can do is to take horse and follow in pursuit as soon as possible! He's only got about an hour's start, and being hampered by his daughter, it isn't possible for him to get over the ground as quickly as we can, and if we only succeed in striking his trail his capture is but a question of time! I mean business in this hyer matter, you bet! and I will not give up the chase if I have to run him clear into Frisco!"

"Hold on a moment, Allcash; don't let us be too hasty; we mustn't jump to a conclusion too quick, you know; we must be governed by circumstances," the colonel protested, speaking quietly, and yet with a gravity that compelled all within hearing to give respectful consideration to his words.

"The door is open, the house is empty, and the man is gone! What more, in the name of all the fiends, do you want?" demanded the landlord.

"I want to be sure that everything is as you say, before I go ahead," the colonel replied.

"The door is open, but that is no proof the house is empty, or that Murdock has gone. It will only take us five minutes to find out, sure, about it, and I propose to examine the house in the first place. Then, if the man is really gone, we can organize a pursuit, and if he has levanted, it is just possible that we may find some clew to put us upon his track."

"Go ahead! Have it your own way, then, but you will see I am right!" the unhappy doctor exclaimed.

But Allcash was not right, as he and all the rest speedily discovered.

Thanks to the Jew's lantern, the seekers after knowledge had plenty of light to aid them in their search.

The moment they entered the house the first thing to greet their eyes was Murdock, extended at full length upon the floor, bound hand and foot with lariats, and the job had been so skillfully performed that the banker was totally incapable of motion. He had also been gagged so that he could not give an alarm, and, in addition, a thick bandage had been bound around his head, so that it was utterly impossible for him to see anything.

Cries of amazement burst from the lips of the townsmen.

"This looks like foul play!" the colonel declared, as he knelt by the side of the helpless man and began to remove the bandage which had so effectually blinded him.

This was removed easily enough, but when it came to the raw-hide thongs bound around Murdock's arms and legs they were knotted so securely that it was necessary to cut them in a dozen different places.

When he was finally freed from the bonds and assisted to his feet the banker was so weak and his limbs so stiff from his confinement that he could not stand and was obliged to sit down. He was pale as a ghost, and as he leaned back against the wall, supported on both sides by his neighbors, he certainly looked as though he had been through a terrible experience.

"Why, Murdock, what is the matter?" the colonel asked.

"Well, colonel, upon my life I am glad to see you," Murdock said, speaking with great difficulty. "I think that another hour of that horrible torture would have about finished me. I have had a most miraculous escape."

"But how did it happen?" demanded Allcash, evidently still suspicious.

"Well, gentlemen, I must confess I can hardly tell you how it happened; it is one of the strangest things ever occurred. I had been out quite late and had just returned from a call upon the colonel here. You know, colonel, I left your house somewhere around twelve o'clock."

The colonel nodded.

"I came straight home and let myself in at the front door. If you remember, Mr. Solomons, I met you and said 'good-night' just as I entered."

"Yesh, yesh; so I vas telling de poys," the Jew asserted.

"I had told my daughter not to sit up for me but to go to bed; so, of course, when I came in everything was in total darkness. I passed through the front room into this one, and had no sooner crossed the threshold than I received a violent blow on the head which knocked me insensible; when I recovered I found myself bound and helpless just as you discovered me."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPY.

THE listeners looked at each other in amazement. This affair beat anything that had ever happened in Shasta Bar since the settlement of the town, and none knew what to make of it.

"By Jove! gentlemen, I reckon there must be a regular band of rascals 'round!" the colonel averred.

"I suppose I have been the victim of a gang who were after plunder, but of course I don't know anything more about it than you do."

"Where ish der watch, Mister Murdock?" asked the old Jew, whose sharp eyes had noticed the absence of Murdock's chain.

"It is gone," responded the banker, after an examination, "and my pocket-book also!"

"But the ten thousand dollars—our ten thousand dollars?" literally howled Allcash.

"Oh, I didn't carry that upon my person! I was not unwise enough to risk it in that way. I gave it to my daughter."

"And where is she?" Smith asked, beginning to get excited.

"Up-stairs, I presume. Of course, gentlemen, I really don't know anything certain about it. I left her here and I told her not to wait up for me, so when I came in and found the house all dark, I took it for granted that she had gone to bed."

There was a moment's silence and the men cast shy glances in each other's faces. Not a man there but put the question to himself:

"Had the unknown ruffians who had perpetrated the outrage upon Murdock also attacked the girl?"

To the mind of the three men who were so deeply interested in the Old Hat mine, there was not a shadow of doubt that the attackers had been in search of the ten thousand dollars—their ten thousand, which, like a will-o'-the-wisp, seemed destined never to come into their hands, although seemingly so near.

It did not appear possible that the ruffians would be content with the booty which they had obtained from Murdock and not ransack the house further.

Not one of the three so deeply interested believed this. They felt satisfied the ten thousand was what the men were after, and would not depart without obtaining that handsome sum.

"I don't hear a sound up-stairs," the colonel observed, breaking the silence.

"I will go up at once, gentlemen, and see," Murdock said, staggering to his feet, still so weak and stiff that he could hardly stand.

The colonel hastened to his assistance.

"Lean on my arm, Mr. Murdock, and if you have no objections I will accompany you."

The banker accepted the proffer, while others drew near, eager to be of assistance.

"Come along with the light, Mr. Solomons," ordered Perkins.

Away then went Perkins and Murdock in the advance, the old Jew close behind them with the lantern, then Smith and Allcash and the rest following.

"I tell you what it is, Smith," Allcash nervously whispered, "my presentiments were right—that ten thousand is gone up and nary cent of it will we ever see again."

"Hush! Crying over spilled milk never brought it back!" reminded Smith, a little roughly. In his mind, as in the minds of nearly all the crowd, one thought so predominated as

to obscure everything else: Had the unknown ruffians harmed Murdock's beautiful daughter?

The answer to the question was soon to come. Murdock when he reached the door of his daughter's apartment hesitated a moment as though he feared to learn the truth.

"Brace up and be a man!" the colonel adjured; "be prepared for the worst, but expect the best!"

Murdock opened the door, which was not locked, and looked into the little chamber, the colonel at his side, while old Solomons held up the lantern to illuminate the chamber.

Carlotta lay upon the bed completely dressed, having evidently laid down without removing her garments in order to wait her father's return before retiring for the night.

She was bound and gagged in precisely the same fashion that Murdock had been.

"Thank heaven! she is alive!" cried the banker, hastening to her side, and trying to undo the lariat which bound her limbs so tightly.

The bandage which blinded her sight was taken away easily enough, but a knife had to be used before the raw-hide could be made to yield.

When the bonds were removed the girl sat up and looked around her in a bewildered sort of way, dazed apparently by the experience through which she had passed.

As soon as she recovered sufficiently to talk she related all that had occurred.

After her father's departure she had retired to her own apartment, placed the candle on the table by the head of her bed and laid down, intending to read until her father came home. Her book, however, was not of sufficient interest to keep her awake and before she was conscious of it she had dozed off to sleep.

How long she slept she knew not, but she was waked suddenly by rude hands laid upon her; the room was in total darkness. She attempted to scream but a gag had been thrust in her mouth, so that it was impossible for her to utter a sound. She struggled desperately, but was as helpless as a child in the hands of the strong men, who bound her securely, placed the bandage over her eyes and then removed her to the floor with as little ceremony as though she had been a bundle of wool.

Then she heard the men strike a match, and in spite of the thick bandage over her eyes, she could distinguish that they lit the candle. They then seemed to be searching the house, and after awhile they took her from the floor, placed her on the bed and departed, and that was all she knew until the rescuers came to her assistance.

"And the ten thousand dollars that were intrusted to your care?" Allcash asked eagerly.

Carlotta looked at her father as though she was in doubt whether she ought to answer the question.

"You can speak freely, my child," the banker said, immediately comprehending the meaning of the look. "This gentleman is one of the owners of the money. It is safe, I hope."

"I don't know, sir; after you gave it to me I brought it up-stairs, as it was too large to carry in my pocket, and I locked it up in my traveling bag."

There the bag stood in the corner and Allcash groaned aloud; it was not likely that men in search of plunder would neglect to examine that receptacle.

Smith had the bag up in his hand immediately and at the first glance all saw proof that the marauders had been there before him.

It was locked, but that trifling circumstance had not baffled the robbers; with a single slash of a bowie-knife they had ripped the side of the bag open and possessed themselves of the valuables they sought.

There had been only a few articles in the bag, and as the girl looked upon the ruins she saw that something besides the money package was gone.

"Oh, papa; my diamond earrings!" she cried. "I took them off and put them in the bag at the same time that I did the money, and they, too, are gone."

"We must organize an instant pursuit!" Murdock exclaimed. "They cannot have got very far off and we may be able to overtake them!"

The rest immediately assented to this idea, and in a short time a well-armed band was on the trail.

Not the slightest trace, though, of the marauders could be found; no one had seen any strangers, or suspicious characters, in the town that night, and after a couple of hours' search, the pursuit was abandoned until morning.

Three more disappointed men than Perkins, Smith and the landlord had never been seen, and Allcash, with a perverseness characteristic of some men, stuck to his idea that the banker was to blame for the whole matter, and that the robbery was but a part of a deep-laid plot to ruin the Old Hat Mining Company.

His partners, however, did not assent to this, although some circumstances of the affair looked extremely suspicious.

And now retrace we our steps a little, and relate how the deed had been done, and then follow in the footsteps of the perpetrators.

The reader will recall that, after the banker's

interview with Perkins and Smith, as he walked toward his home a person followed in his footsteps. To his very door followed, and when he disappeared within, the watcher leaned against a tree which stood a short distance off and gave himself up to meditation. This spy had kept so careful a watch upon the banker that all the conversation in Smith and Perkins's cabin, between the three, had been overheard by him.

"Now, what is his game?" the watcher murmured. "Is he going to act honest or play possum? The money has been returned to him, and any one would think that if he was going to act square and above-board, he would be eager to get the cash into the hands of its rightful owners as soon as possible. To-morrow at nine he will pay it into their hands; plenty of time for a lot of things to happen between now and then."

Then, of a sudden, the glimmer of a light upstairs, in Murdock's house, caught his eye.

"I must see what he is up to," he muttered, and he circled around to the rear of the house.

Hardly was this maneuver performed when from the rear door came three men who skulked away in the darkness like the followers of evil.

"My head to a football," the watcher cried, "that those fellows have got the ten thousand dollars! Anyhow, I'll follow on the trail and see if I can't take a hand in the game."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THREE OF A KIND.

THE three men who came from the banker's house acted as if they did not wish to attract attention. Instead of passing around the house to the main street they struck off toward the distant foot-hills.

This maneuver favored the spy, for, as the country soon became rough and broken, he found it an easy matter to track the men without their notice.

The moon was well up, but as a storm threatened, the clouds passing over the sky obscured her beams, so that for one-half of the time at least it was as dark as though there was no moon.

A better night for his purpose the spy could not have wished.

About a half a mile from the Bar an old Indian trail led through the hills, running parallel with the river.

When the three reached this trail they turned into it and headed to the north, whereat the spy exclaimed:

"A dollar to a cent this isn't the first time I have run across these three gentlemen. Funny if they should turn out to be my old acquaintances. If so, my suspicions will be confirmed."

On went the three, never looking behind them; therefore the spy had an easy task.

A couple of miles below the Bar the trail wound through a mountainous country, where the huge rocks cropped out in all their rugged grandeur.

The clouds cleared away just as the three began to thread their way amid these rocks, and the spy was obliged to use extreme caution to prevent discovery. Then, all of a sudden, right in the full light of the moonbeams the three men vanished.

Vanished is the word, for one after the other walked right into a small clump of pines growing before what seemed to be a solid rock, and thus completely disappeared.

Which did not astonish the spy, for he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Aha! Just as I thought! This has been another move in the game! As it happened I was on hand to upset the first stroke, and, thanks to the chances of fortune, I shall be able to beat their game again. It is strange how these fellows happened to stumble upon the old McCloud Chasm, but I reckon there is one way of getting down into the lava pit they don't dream of, with all their smartness. There will be a fourth party present at their conference that they little expect."

Then, like one familiar with the ground, the spy struck off to the left, clambering over the rocks with the nimbleness of a squirrel, and, by a sort of blind path, not to be detected a few paces off, he made a wide circuit to the rear of the huge rock within whose massive side the three men had vanished.

And from the position which the spy had gained he could look down into the little miniature valley into which the three men had penetrated.

The McCloud Chasm, as it was called by the red-men who once lorded it over that region, was one of those singular freaks of nature so common to the wild country wherein the lava-beds are situated.

By some convulsion of nature a little oblong valley had been formed, about two hundred feet long by a hundred feet wide. Clumps of bushes dotted its surface, and a little brooklet, full of spotted, leaping trout ran through it. Around on all sides rose the solid rocks, their sides as regular as though formed by the craftsman's cunning hand. There was only one way of gaining admittance to the Chasm, and that was by a narrow, half-underground passage, which led from the old trail through the rock.

The mouth of this passage was so closely masked by the clump of pines in front that the keenest eye could detect the opening in the rock only by passing through the pines, and examining closely.

We have said there was but one way of getting into this mountain pocket, but we meant without artificial aid, for from the spot to which the spy had made his way, a point at the lower end of the valley, where the rocks breaking away allowed some lusty junipers to woo the breeze, some thirty feet above the level of the glade, by the aid of a stout rope it would be an easy matter for an agile man to descend to the ground beneath.

Concealed in the midst of the junipers the spy could overhear every word of the conversation between the two men who had indolently cast themselves upon the velvet-like sward, only some fifty feet from where their follower was crouched in the bushes.

And as though Dame Fortune had decided to look with favoring eye upon the man, who, single-handed, was about to cope with three stout fellows, the clouds, which had at intervals obscured the moon broke away, and the queen of night shone forth in all her glory.

"Good, that is what we want," the spy murmured. "The more light the better, for I have an idea that these gentlemen, who have so coolly taken possession of my old haunt, and myself, will have some important business to transact before the gray light of morning breaks over yon high eastern hills."

And favored by the light the watcher, who was no other than Dick Talbot, made a discovery which caused an exclamation of surprise.

The big fellow—the leader of the three, apparently—was his old opponent, Shanghai Sam. His companions, too, were known to Dick; being two men of the town whose reputations were none of the best—miners they pretended to be, gamblers and roughs they most certainly were. The tall one was known as Poker Jim, a name bestowed upon him on account of his mania for that game, for, though an inveterate gambler, he was never known to play anything else. The short, thick-set comrade answered to the cognomen of Yreka Bill, simply because he hailed from that town and was invariably "blowing" about it.

"Three lively customers," Talbot muttered, when he ascertained who they were. "Birds of a feather flock together"—an old adage—true enough in this case, for three bigger rascals than these blackguards couldn't be scared up in all California."

"Wa-al, boys, I reckon we did this hyer job up in prime style!" Sam exclaimed, with a chuckle of satisfaction, as he stretched his huge limbs on the soft sward.

"To the Queen's taste!" responded Yreka Bill, with a grin. "I tell you w'ot it is, Sam, when anybody wants a job of this kind done right up to the hundle we're the gang that can do it. Why, Yreka itself couldn't discount us!"

"Right you are! and it would be safe to gamble on that," Poker Jim remarked. "A man would be as safe to bet on that as if he held four aces 'g'in' a bob-tailed flash."

"Now, pards, though I am as good-natured a cuss as you would be apt to run ag'in' in a week, yet I'm nary man's fool!"

"You bet!" cried Yreka Bill; "anybody that tries to pick you up for a flat, Shanghai, will get most beautifully left."

"Right again! A man might as well attempt to straddle the blind with nary pair in his hand!" Jim declared.

"Now in this hyer deal, the man we are working for, reckoned that we were three flats!"

"Oh, no, no, Sam!" chorused the other two.

"Wa-al, pards, you kin figur' it right down! He's either a flat himself or else he took us for greenhorns."

"No greenhorn in mine!"

"No, sir-ee! you can't call that 'turn' on this hyer party!" Jim exclaimed.

"Now, jest see the leetle game he put up. We war to stop the stage and go through the pilgrims; we were to have all the plunder we collared exceptin' this ten thousand-dollar package, which we was to turn over to him. In fact, my bold pards, we were to be the cats to pull his chestnuts out of the fire. Ain't that so?"

"Bout the size of it," Jim assented.

"Oh, yes, that's sol thar ain't any use of tryin' to get away from it," Bill affirmed.

"That was the game he set up. We were to have all the plunder that we got out of the rest of the pilgrims and when we put the ten thousand-dollar package in his hands he was to pay us one thousand. That is, we were to give him ten for one."

"Oh, it was jest shocking—the boys in Yreka would never stand any sich divvy as that!"

"No, sir, hoss-fly, you kin jest bet all yer wealth that they wouldn't!" Jim declared.

"Wa-al, pards, I tell you, I made up my mind from the furst that I wouldn't have it!" Sam went on; "I didn't say anything to you 'bout it, 'cos I thought it would be time enough to talk arter we got the ten thousand dollars in our hands. In course, as you know, we slipped up on it when we tackled the stage, and I reckon

oned at the time that it was some game of my bold buck to beat us, but when I heered that the package was in Shasta Bar all right, I didn't know what to make on it. But we've got the money now, safe!" Then, producing it, he laid it upon the grass before him. "And my idee is that we'll collar this leetle plunder!"

CHAPTER XXIV. A BOLD DEMAND.

TALBOT's eyes sparkled as he looked upon the precious package which had gone through so many strange adventures.

It was just by accident that he had arrived at any knowledge of the ten thousand dollars. On his way to Shasta Bar he had halted for a few days at Cinnabar City, and one evening while sitting in a secluded nook amid the ruins of the mine which in the old time had been the scene of such startling events, he, unwittingly, had listened to a conversation between three men, who had sought the solitary spot for a secret consultation. He gathered from the conversation that it was their purpose to rob the Shasta Bar coach on the day Murdock, the banker, took passage there in, their main object being to gain possession of the ten thousand dollars which Murdock was bringing to the Old Hat Mining Company. Talbot determined to upset this little scheme by warning the banker, so that he would be on his guard, but no sooner had he come to this resolution than he discovered from the further conversation of the ruffians that the attack was set for that very night, the coach already having departed, and that they were only waiting to allow it to get well on its journey before setting out in pursuit.

With Injun Dick to think was to act, and his resolution being taken on the instant, five minutes later he was in the saddle. He had determined to play road-agent and rob the coach himself, and how well he succeeded in this design the reader knows.

He preferred this course to simply warning the banker that his valuables were in jeopardy, for from what the men had said, he had come to the conclusion that there was some underhand work about the affair, but who the party was who had egged the three on to commit this deed of violence he did not learn.

And as our hero rode on his lonely way that night he thought how strange it was that fate should again bring him in contact with the lovely girl whom he had encountered in San Francisco. He had taken a wonderful interest in her, and yet when he had come to know the father an instinctive dislike grew up in his mind, and so, after the money package had been returned, he kept a close watch upon him, and thus he had been able to track the three ruffians to their lair.

"I wronged my friend Murdock after all, then, it seems," he murmured, when he saw the bully produce the package. "I must confess I had an idea that he was in league with these fellows, and that he was the man who had put up the job on the stage, and I am not sorry to learn that I was in error. But now, my esteemed friends, I'll have to have a little discussion with you in regard to that money."

A loud "Ah!" came from the lips of Poker Jim and Yreka Bill as their companion laid the precious package down upon the sward.

"Oh, well may you smack your lips and grin!" Shanghai Sam exclaimed, as he noted the glowering eyes and longing looks of his followers. "Hyer's a fortune for us, boys! Jest think of it! ten thousand dollars! ain't that a tidy bit of money, and all for us three?"

"It's a big haul!" Poker Jim observed.

"I reckon a feller could cut a shine on sich a pile!" Bill declared.

"Now, boys, I ain't any man's fool! Whoever fries me for a flat will lose his fat!" Shanghai asserted. "The agreement I made, you know, with the party that put us onto this lay, was that we were to have a thousand when we forked over this package."

The other two nodded to signify that that was the way that they understood it.

"Now, pards, did you never heer tell of the old saying that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush?"

"You bet!" responded the others, in a breath.

"It's a bully true thing, to, you kin jest bet yer bottom dollar on it, every time! Now, then, this hyer package is the bird in the hand, why should we let go of it for to take the other? or, to come right down to the bed-rock, why should we give up ten thousand dollars for to make one?"

"We would be a pack of idiots for to do sich a thing!" Yreka Bill exclaimed.

"Them is my sentiments, exactly!" Poker Jim hastened to declare. "Why, if we should be flats enuff for to give up this money, now that we have got our hooks upon it, we ought to be booted clean out of California as a disgrace to the State!"

"In course, I s'pose the party w'ot put us up to the job will kick considerable," Shanghai suggested.

"Let him!" cried Bill, in supreme contempt.

"Yes, that's w'ot I say, let 'im kick!" Jim chimed in. "S'pose he does cut up ugly? w'ot

do we keer? If he dared to gi'n me any of his chin I would as soon plug him with a piece of cold lead, or shove a knife into him, as to take a swaller of bug-juice, and that is the kind of a man I am!"

The others nodded their heads approvingly at this speech, as its sentiments suited them exactly.

"Pards, this leetle ten thousand is ours, and we are going to have the benefit of it if we have to fight our boss and the hull durned town of Shasta Bar besides! Now, lemme seel thar's ten thousand dollars in this package, and thar's three on us; that will be three thousand and some hundreds apiece—"

"Hold on, Sam! I make a motion that, seeing as how you have managed this hyar business right up to the handle, you take four thousand, while Bill and me collar three apiece; w'ot do you say, Bill? ain't that 'bout the squar' thing?"

"All right, that suits me," Yreka replied, in answer to Jim's suggestion.

"Pards, you do me proud!" and the big fellow ducked his head in what was intended to be a profound bow. "You hit me jest whar I live, but I reckon I'll be able to make it up to you, for this won't be the last good thing that I will scare up; and now for the divvy!"

Shanghai Sam, his fingers trembling with excitement, tore open the package, and as he did so a yell of astonishment rose on the air.

Talbot had taken advantage of the attention of the ruffians being so fully occupied to affix the end of a stout lariat that he carried securely to the trunk of the juniper, then, by its aid had descended hand over hand to the glade below, and so quickly was this performed that almost before the cry of astonishment with which his appearance from his ambush was greeted had died away, he was in the glade, revolvers in hand, ready for battle.

The ruffians leaped to their feet and drew their weapons, Sam, in the excitement of the moment dropping the money-package as though it were nothing but worthless paper.

For a moment the opponents stood as motionless as statues and glared at each other.

Never had there been a surprise more complete, for Talbot had descended into the glade with as little warning as though he had dropped from the clouds.

Shanghai Sam was the only one acquainted with Talbot personally, for neither Poker Jim nor Yreka Bill had happened to meet with our hero since he had taken up his quarters in Shasta Bar.

A hoarse growl of rage came from the lips of the burly ruffian as he recognized the man who had given him such a terrible lesson, and as he looked his yet unhealed wounds seemed to quicken and burn.

"Aha! my gentle friend, you remember me!" exclaimed Talbot, fully comprehending the meaning of the growl.

"Remember you! I reckon that I won't forget ye as long as I live!" Sam exclaimed, savagely.

"You don't surprise me, sir, for I had an idea that I had produced a lasting impression; it's a way I've got."

"You're mighty pert with yer gab!" Shanghai exclaimed.

"Yes, sir; I wasn't behind the door when tongues were given out; but I say, you fellows are taking it mighty cool and easy here on my property—"

"Your property?" And the ruffians looked amazed.

"My property. I own all the land hereabouts. I won it years ago in single fight with the greatest McCloud chieftain that ever pressed moccasin to earth, and I don't like intruders, so you had better get out and just leave that little package of money. I'll take care of that and see it is returned to its rightful owners."

"Wa-al, you've got more cheek than a Government mule!" Shanghai exclaimed, who did not feel in the least disposed to be bullied, for although Talbot had got the best of him in single fight, now that he had two pards to back his quarrel, he did not think that his former opponent stood a ghost of a show. In fact, he thought that Talbot was foolhardy in the extreme in daring to descend into the glade.

"You ought to be a judge of that sort of thing; you are not badly off yourself," Talbot replied. "But come! enough of this talk. I want that ten thousand dollars and I want you to get out!"

"Cuss your impudence!" Yreka Bill exclaimed, unable to restrain his wrath longer. "Why, you 'tarnal greenhorn! don't you know that if we go for you once, we'll eat you without salt?"

"If you try it on, you 'ill find that I am the most unwholesome morsel that you ever tackled," Talbot replied.

"Go 'way, sonny, or we'll chew you up into shoe strings!" Poker Jim cried.

"It is to be war, then?" and there was a dangerous gleam in Talbot's clear eyes.

"War! you don't mean to say that you will try for to fight all three on us?" Shanghai asked, hardly able to believe that such a thing was possible.

"Unless you run when I come on I shall most

certainly have to tackle you, but it won't take long for me to lay you out!"

"Oh, you're crazy!" Shanghai declared.

"Lay us out! Young feller, have you picked out your tombstone and ordered your coffin yet?" Poker Jim asked.

"If you haven't, you ought to, 'cos I reckon we'll turn you toes upward in 'bout a minit arter we go for you!" Yreka Bill cried.

"Will you yield up the ten thousand dollars and get out?"

"Oh!" yelled the ruffians in derision.

"Then you are my antelopes!" Talbot exclaimed, advancing rapidly.

CHAPTER XXV.

MURDOCK IS PUZZLED.

IN common with the majority of the inhabitants of Shasta Bar, Mr. Banker Murdock had been well pleased at the news that a barber-shop had been established in the camp.

For a man to whom a clean shave was a necessity, and who was getting on in years so that his hand was not as steady as it had once been, to be able to avoid the trouble of shaving was really a luxury. For quite a time the banker had been obliged to let his beard grow at its own sweet will, simply because his hand had become so uncertain that he no longer dared to shave himself, and Murdock, being a neat, trim gentleman by nature, hated the idea of sporting a bushy beard, for all the world like the hirsute appendages commonly affected by the miners in the foot-hills, so in a short time after the establishment of Mrs. Ashford's shop, the banker made bold to call.

The female barber had been so well patronized since she had "opened out" that it was seldom a customer got a chance to be shaved without being obliged to wait for three or four other men who were ahead of him.

Knowing this fact by common report, and not being inclined to waste his time, cooling his heels in the shop, Murdock selected the dusk of the evening, just before the supper hour, for his visit, calculating that the barber-shop would be apt to have less patronage at that hour than at any other.

This conclusion was quite correct, for when the banker entered Mrs. Ashford's place of business there wasn't a single customer within, and the lady herself was engaged in the inner apartment preparing supper.

Twilight had set in and the interior of the barber-shop was shaded in gloom. Mrs. Ashford had a lamp in the inner room, but it was at the further end of the apartment so that its rays did not penetrate into the front room.

"I will be in there in a minute!" the lady called out, hearing the clang of the closing door and comprehending that a customer had entered.

"All right, madam, don't hurry yourself, I can wait," Murdock replied, seating himself in a chair by the window.

And then there came the rattle of a falling dish.

"She's dropped something," the banker muttered. "These women's fingers are all thumbs." By which it was plain that Murdock did not have a good opinion of the softer sex.

The banker was right; the dish which the woman held in her hand, into which she was about to put some meat, which was hissing and spluttering in the hot fat of the frying-pan upon the stove, had fallen from her nerveless hand when the voice of Murdock fell full upon her ears, smashing into a dozen pieces.

Like a woman stricken by a heavy blow she reeled back against the wall, clasping her hands upon her temples as though in agony.

"Oh, what does this mean?" she cried. "Why is it that the voice of this stranger brings back the memory of the man who did me such a fearful wrong years and years ago?"

"What is the matter, madam, no material damage, I hope?" the banker inquired, rather mystified by the silence which had followed the fall of the dish.

"No, sir, no, sir," she replied, forcing herself to speak, although she hardly knew what she said. "It is *his* voice," she muttered to herself, "but am I not deceived by some fancied resemblance? It does not seem possible that I should find him here—that I should stumble upon him at the very beginning of my quest. Let me compose myself. If he is an utter stranger it is not meet that he should see me thus disturbed, and if it is the man I seek, it would be utter ruin to all my plans to be recognized. I must summon up all my courage, and play my part so as not to be." Then she spoke aloud, "Have patience, sir, if you please, I will attend to you in a moment."

"Very well, madam," Murdock replied, and as he spoke in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, Mrs. Ashford came to the conclusion that if he was the man she supposed him to be, his perceptions were less keen than her own, and he had not noticed anything in her voice to attract his attention.

She hurried to remove the meat from the fire, and then, taking the lamp, with the precaution of turning it down quite low, she entered the outer apartment, put the lamp in the swing suspended over the barber's chair and began to prepare her tools.

"I am very sorry, sir, to have been obliged to have kept you waiting," she said, strapping the razor as though anxious to put as keen an edge upon it as possible. "But I was busy getting my supper. At this hour I seldom have any customers and so I take advantage of it to eat my supper. If you will have the kindness to seat yourself in the chair I will be ready in a moment."

"Very well, I do not require a full shave," Murdock remarked, rising and taking the indicated seat. "I merely wish my beard trimmed—trimmed quite short and the ragged hairs upon the edge removed."

"Yes, sir."

Mrs. Ashford's heart beat quickly. It was plain that he had no suspicions as yet, while she on her part was quite sure he was the man whom she had taken him to be. Years had worked a wondrous change in him. The smooth-faced, slender-formed, obsequious, cunning clerk had developed into the gaunt and wrinkled man of fifty, and but for the voice the woman felt sure that she would never have been able to recognize him.

And so, full of confidence that the change in her own appearance had been equally great, so as to defy recognition, she turned up the lamp. The instant the eyes of the banker fell upon her face he started, and then stared at her with all the eyes in his head.

But Mrs. Ashford was on her guard and prepared for just such a scrutiny, although she had hoped she would escape it, for as he had not detected anything familiar in her voice, she trusted that neither would her features recall any memories of the past.

But the banker, although of indifferent recollection as far as names and voices were concerned, had a really wonderful memory for faces. It was his boast that when he had once seen a face he never forgot it, and so the moment the lamp was turned up, so that the light fully illuminated the room and he got a good view of Mrs. Ashford's features, the conviction immediately flashed upon him that she was no stranger.

"You wish your beard trimmed, and your hair, also, I suppose, as it is quite long and needs it," she said, pretending not to notice his stare of amazement and examining his person with a professional eye.

"Yes, yes; but, madam, it seems to me that I know you."

"Indeed, sir? Why, that is strange."

"Don't you remember having met me somewhere?"

Mrs. Ashford shook her head, and a well-assumed expression of astonishment appeared upon her features.

"You do not remember?"

"No, sir; of course I know who you are, for in such a small place as this one soon gets acquainted with all the principal people. You have been pointed out to me as Mr. Murdock, the banker, and I expected you would be one of my customers."

"Yes, yes; but did we not meet a great many years ago, say twenty or thirty?" Murdock asked, evidently bewildered, and plainly somewhat alarmed.

"Twenty or thirty years ago?" the lady exclaimed, with that peculiar expression of astonishment, that the female sex know so well how to assume. "Why, Mr. Murdock, what are you thinking about! I was only a baby then; I am only a little over thirty now!" And she blushed and appeared confused as if it was a terrible thing to confess to such an age.

The banker was puzzled; he was just as sure that he had met the woman in the days gone as that he was a living, breathing man, and although for the life of him he could not place her, yet, somehow, the remembrance seemed to come back to him that there was something unpleasant connected with his acquaintance in the past with this lady. He had wronged her, or she had been the cause of trouble to him, and as he was obliged to admit, when he came to think of himself about the matter, since he had attained to man's estate, he had seldom allowed anybody to get the best of him in any matter whatsoever, so the chances were great that this woman owed him a debt of vengeance, rather than that the obligation was on his side.

And as Murdock looked up in her firm-set and resolute face, he felt decidedly uneasy; if this woman was his foe, he felt convinced that she would be a dangerous one. Her professions that she knew him not did not seem to tranquilize his mind at all, for it was exactly the game that an able and vindictive enemy would play. It was done to throw him off his guard so that a deadly blow might be administered without his being able to protect himself from it.

"Perhaps it was not so long ago," he said, at last, after vainly puzzling his wits to try and recall the circumstances connected with his acquaintance with the woman.

"Oh, we may have met, sir, because my memory is sometimes faulty, and I may have forgotten the circumstance."

"What is your name?"

"Mary Ashford."

"You have been married?"

"Why, do I look like a married woman?" she asked with a light laugh.

Murdock was annoyed for he believed this a query to be assumed.

"Oh, no; I merely asked; but if you want a husband you'll find plenty up in this region."

"I'm in no hurry to surrender my liberty," and again the woman laughed as merrily as though free from all care.

Murdock pursued the subject no further, but resigned himself to the hands of the female barber, and when the work was completed paid his bill and departed.

"That woman is dangerous—she means mischief, I am sure!" he muttered, the moment he got into the street. "I must put Carlotta on the scent as soon as possible."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MEETING.

MURDOCK brooded over the matter all that night; he even dreamed of it in his sleep; the mysterious woman seemed to be hovering around his bedside, but upon her shoulders was the face of a fiend and her fingers had turned into long and bony talons which threatened to tear to his very heart. It will plainly be seen then that the banker's slumbers that night afforded him very little substantial rest.

He was up early in the morning and at the breakfast-table commenced upon his plan to bring to his aid his daughter's wits.

He had not been idle during the previous evening and had gone around town for the purpose of learning all that he could in regard to the woman he dreaded. He might as well have staid at home though, for all the information he picked up amounted to nothing. No one in the camp knew any more about the woman than he did, and all that he learned was that it was the general opinion of the inhabitants of Shasta Bar that the female barber was a mighty fine woman and a credit to the town, and as for being unprotected, Old Bully Thompson—who, all hands agreed, was a hard case to tackle when he got going—had openly said it would give him the greatest pleasure in life to "chaw up" anybody who dared to look sideways at that "ere she-shaver."

One thing though which he thought he might be able to use to advantage he succeeded in discovering.

As she was seldom troubled with customers from twelve o'clock until about four in the afternoon, it was her habit every pleasant day to take a walk up the valley beyond the limits of the town.

Now this custom afforded an opportunity for Carlotta to meet Mrs. Ashford, just by accident, of course, and enter into conversation with her.

It was a difficult matter though for the banker to engage his daughter in the scheme and Murdock was obliged to exert all his powers of persuasion.

He had explained that he had reason to believe that the lady was not unknown to him, and that he feared she had come to Shasta Bar for the express purpose of doing him a mischief.

"But why should she wish to harm you, papa?" Carlotta asked, amazed at the information.

"An old-time grudge, my dear, and some women you know are fearfully resentful. I cannot remember the particulars of the affair, but I am satisfied that in the past I have had trouble with her, and that she comes here to do me an evil turn."

"But it is so strange that you should not be able to remember about it."

"Yes, it is strange, and I would gladly give a thousand dollars if I could only recall the circumstances under which we have met, and that is the reason why I want you to get into conversation with her; you may be able to find out something that will give me a clew."

"Oh, papa, it is just like playing the spy!"

Now this was an idea that the banker found difficult to upset, but by plausible words Murdock removed it at last, and Carlotta agreed to undertake the task.

So, being informed by her father of the time that Mrs. Ashford would probably be found in the valley above the town, Carlotta anticipated it, and when Mrs. Ashford came along by the bank of the stream she encountered the girl, who, seated on a boulder, that cropped out on the bank, was busily engaged in watching the swiftly flowing waters.

Carlotta had become so absorbed in thought while she waited, that she had almost forgotten the task which she had taken upon herself, and she started in surprise when Mrs. Ashford came around the bend in the stream.

The surprise was mutual, for the mysterious woman halted the moment her eyes rested upon Carlotta's face, and a strange expression came over her features.

And the girl too, as she gazed with earnest eyes at the still beautiful face of the woman, could not help thinking that her father's suspicions must be unfounded; surely this was no vile woman with the heart of a demon, hungering for revenge.

Mrs. Ashford had recognized Carlotta upon the instant, although she had never happened to see her before, but she had heard her de-

scribed a dozen times, for young and pretty girls were not common in Shasta Bar, and the arrival of a maid so beautiful as Carlotta had created a deal of excitement in the mining camp, and almost every one of Mrs. Ashford's customers, while enjoying her professional care, had asked her:

"Hav you see that rip-stunning leetle gal that old Murdock brought up from Frisco? His daughter, he says, but she looks about as much like him as a canary bird looks like a buzzard!"

And the woman, as she gazed upon the girl, saw that the gossips of the town were right. There was not the least bit of resemblance between the father and daughter.

"Not a feature in common," she murmured, as she approached. "He resembles a hawk, while this girl is like a dove. She has a sweet face, a good one too. Is it possible that she can be this savage wretch's daughter? I can hardly believe it."

And Carlotta, on her part, had murmured to herself:

"Is this the woman whom I am to play the spy upon—the woman whom my father fears and whom he describes as a female fiend? Why, there is naught but goodness in her face. A more noble expression I have never seen upon the face of womankind. Oh, there must be some mistake! and I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself that I was weak enough to allow father to persuade me to undertake this mission."

"I must speak to her," Mrs. Ashford murmured. "There is something in her face that draws me irresistibly toward her in spite of myself."

By this time she had come within speaking distance, so she nodded pleasantly and said:

"You are Miss Murdock, I presume."

"Yes, madam," answered Carlotta, somewhat confused to be thus unexpectedly named, for in the innocence of her heart she hadn't any idea that the lady would know who she was, and then, too, she had set out to play the spy, thinking that she could keep her identity concealed.

"My name is Ashford—Mary Ashford, and I am very glad to make your acquaintance. This is the first time that I have seen you, and yet, somehow, I feel as if we were going to be very good friends."

There was a wistful look upon the face of the woman as she uttered the words and almost before Carlotta knew what she was doing she had jumped to her feet and tendered her hand to the other.

"I am sure, madam, I hope so," she replied, her heart won at once by the beseeching look upon the face of Mrs. Ashford.

And as the two stood with clasped hands, eye looking into eye, it did not seem to them as if this was their first meeting, but on the contrary as though their friendship had extended through many a long year. They were like once dear friends who after long separation had again come together.

"And so you are Allan Murdock's daughter?" Mrs. Ashford said after quite a long pause.

"Yes, madam."

"And yet there is not a feature of your face that resembles his."

"So I have been told before."

"And your mother—where is she?"

"Dead, madam."

"It is so strange," Mrs. Ashford murmured, still keeping her eyes intently fixed upon the girl's face.

"What is strange, madam?"

"Your face is as familiar to me as if I had known you in the long ago, and yet it is not possible," the lady said. "At the time to which I refer, you were nothing but a baby, and even if I had seen you then it is not possible that your face could still linger in my memory after all this lapse of years."

"Perhaps you knew my mother!" Carlotta remarked gently, and with a wistful look upon her bright young face.

"No, I think not; who was she?"

"Alas, madam; I do not know."

"You do not know?"

"No, madam, I am utterly in the dark in regard to my mother. She died when I was an infant; my earliest remembrances are of the boarding-school where I was placed at a tender age; I was only about four years old and of my life before that time memory retains not a vestige. My father always avoided speaking of my mother, and I well remember when I was only a little prattling child that he chided me harshly, because I questioned him upon the subject and cried, child-like, for the mother whom I missed so much."

"There is some mystery then connected with your mother?" and there was an eager, hungry look upon the face of the woman as she put the question.

"Yes, and a painful one too, evidently, for my father cannot bear even now to have me speak in regard to the subject. A short time ago in an uncautious moment I referred to her, and in anger he bade me never again so wound him. It is very strange—is it not?"

"Very—very strange, for if he loved your mother why should it annoy him to have you speak of her?"

"I do not know—I cannot understand it at all."

"Miss Murdock, do you believe in dreams?"

The girl looked amazed at the abrupt question.

"I really don't know, but I suppose not."

"And yet dreams have brought me here from the far East. I have a purpose—a mission of vengeance; night after night I dreamed of this wild land and a mystic voice bade me seek it. The way was even pointed out. I came, and to my astonishment, I find everything here exactly as it was depicted in my dreams. And now I meet you and something whispers me that the hour when my purpose will be realized is near at hand, but I must be cautious and work by stealth. I can trust you not to betray my secret?"

"You can!" responded Carlotta, impulsively.

"For the present then, good-by! Feign some excuse to come and see me as often as you can, and together we may be able to solve the mystery that hangs over your childhood!"

Another warm clasp of hands, the pressure of lips to lips and then Mrs. Ashford hurried away, trembling with emotion.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

THE abrupt movement took the three by surprise, for in spite of his words they did not believe it was possible that one man would dare to attack three.

Crack, crack, crack, rung out the sharp revolver reports. Three shots, one fired by each ruffian, and all aimed with deadly intent at Talbot, but his rapid advance disconcerted the outlaws, and so, while two bullets missed him, going wide of the mark, the third one only inflicted a slight wound in his shoulder.

And then Dick opened fire.

Thrice his revolver spoke and each time a yell of mingled rage and pain followed the report.

Two of the ruffians were down, disabled from taking an active part in the "war," and the third, the bully, Shanghai Sam, all of a sudden seized with mortal fear at witnessing this new proof of the skill of the man who had once trounced him so cleverly, with a howl of despair took to his heels and ran for the entrance to the glade as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Come back, you scoundrell stand your ground and take your gruel like a man!" Talbot exclaimed, sending a shot after the fugitive; and so well-aimed was it that the bullet came within an inch of Sam's head, despite the fact that he was some distance off and racing over the ground at greyhound-like speed.

The bullet came so near that he felt the wind of it, and into his excited mind the idea instantly flashed that a part of his ear had been taken off, so he gave another howl and ran if anything faster than before.

Talbot came to a halt.

"Well, may I be hanged! if this ain't the most hollow affair I ever got mixed up with! The ruction is over almost before it commenced."

Then he turned his attention to the two men upon the ground. Poker Jim was flat upon his face, as though either dead or mortally wounded, but Yreka Bill, who had received a bullet in the thigh, still kept possession of his revolver and there was an ugly look upon his face; he had risen to a sitting posture, and Talbot instantly suspected that he intended to fire at him upon the first favorable opportunity.

Instantly Dick leveled his revolver.

"Hold on, don't fire!" cried Bill, quick to take the alarm.

"Put down your weapon, then!" replied Talbot, sternly. "Don't try to come any of your sharp games with me!"

"Why, I have surrendered."

"So I supposed, but you are handling that weapon though as if you meant mischief."

"Oh, I'll put it down if you don't like it," Bill remarked, sulkily, and as he spoke he put the revolver upon the ground in front of him, but so near that he could easily snatch it up again.

"Have the kindness to throw that weapon a yard or two away," and Talbot as he spoke leveled his revolver full at the desperado in a manner that plainly showed he was not to be trifled with in the least.

"What in thunder is the matter with you, anyway?" growled the bravo. "Haven't I told you that I am a whipped man and what more do you want?"

"Oh, you are whipped all right; any fool can see that, but I don't intend that you shall get a chance to come any gum-game upon me. I don't trust you. You ain't anything but a mean, sneaking coyote of a fellow, and though you are afraid to face me openly, like a man, I am perfectly satisfied that if you got a chance you would strike me in the back in a moment, so toss that shooting iron away, or I will fit you for a hole in the ground, instant!"

Bill was judge enough of human nature to know that Talbot would be as good as his words if he did not instantly comply with his command, and so, reluctantly, he threw the pistol from him.

"Got another revolver concealed about you anywhere?" Talbot asked, suspiciously.

"Nary one," responded the other, and from the dogged, sulky way in which he spoke, our hero felt satisfied he was telling the truth. Then Talbot turned his attention to Poker Jim.

As we have said, that worthy was sprawling upon his face, apparently fast clutched in the cold embrace of death.

"Well, well, this fellow is settled for as far as this world is concerned," Talbot mused.

"And I didn't intend to kill him either, for I don't really think that either of you two fellows are fit to die. Now if I had wanted to settle this fellow's hash I should have aimed at his head. I know the very spot, right by the ear; a ball put in there, although no bigger than a pea, will make a man cash in his checks every time. See, I will give you a pointer! I'll play him just in the very spot."

And then, right on the instant, Poker Jim suddenly recovered and rose to a sitting posture.

"Hol' on, pard!" he exclaimed. "If it is all the same to you I had rather you wouldn't try any experiments on my carcass. I ain't anxious to have any holes drilled into my head."

"Why, I thought you were dead!"

"Well, I ain't, and I reckon I am worth jest about a hundred dead men, but as far as fighting goes, I pass! I want it distinctly understood that I have had all I wanted of this hyer game and I propose to draw out. 'Tain't any of my funeral, anyhow; that cuss that gave leg-bail is the man w'ot put up the job. I'll own right up that I took a hand in the picnic, but now that he has quit, I'm out too!"

"You have been playing 'possum!"

"Stranger, you underestimate your abilities with the shooting iron," Poker Jim replied with a great deal of dignity. "I want you to understand that I am no slouch and I didn't keel over all in a heap with nary scratch onto me. You plugged me for keeps, and though I reckon now that it ain't so close a call as I thought for, yet at the time, I reckoned that my hash was settled, for sure! I got it in the shoulder; it hurts like thunder! but for all that I guess I will be able to rattle my hash for some time to come."

"Well, gentlemen, these leetle misunderstanding will crop out now and then you know," Talbot observed.

"You bet! but, stranger, I want you to know that as far as I am concerned, the thing is ended. You play too hefty a game for me to tackle. Bill hyer, being a kind of a natural born idiot, and as bull-headed as thunder, may be kinder hankering arter some more soup from the same dish, but I ain't, and you kin jest bet all the rocks you kin raise on that."

"I am glad to hear it, for, pilgrims, I don't bear any malice," Talbot observed.

"Malice!" growled Yreka Bill, still chafing over his defeat. "Well, I should think not! Considering how you have flaxed us you ought not to. We're the cusses that has got the right to growl."

"Bill, you are unreasonable!" exclaimed Poker Jim, with a wise shake of the head. "We went for this gent hyer, three to one, and if he had the sand to lay us out, we hain't got no right to complain."

"That is the right way to look at it. And now, boys, I want a little information."

"Sail in; I'll do w'ot I kin for you."

"I reckon you three were the men who stopped the Cinnabar stage the other night?"

"Right you are; we, us and company."

"Shanghai Sam was the man who planned the attack?"

"Kerreck! All down but nine!"

"How long have you two and Shanghai been pards?"

"Only a leetle while; jest afore the attack on the coach. You see, me and Bill hyer have been pards for some time, and we were over to Cinnabar City on a raid, and we didn't make the riddle quite as cute as we thought for, and, to come right down to the bed-rock, both on us were flat broke. Jest then Sam ran across us and put it to us as to how we would like to go for the stage. In the fix we was in we wasn't inclined to be 'ticular as to a ha'r how we got money so long as we made a raise some way, so we agreed to go for the hearse, and seeing as how you 'pear to be pretty well posted 'bout the affair, I 'spose you know that another cuss got in ahead of us and grabbed the plunder?"

"Yes, I know that; but how about this affair to-night?"

"How we managed to collar that money package that we didn't get the fust time?"

"Exactly."

"Well, we pried open old Murdock's door when he was out, waited in the dark until he came in, and then went for him."

"Ah, he did not give it to you then of his own free will."

"I bet you he didn't! Why, we gagged the old galoot and bound him so tightly with lariats that if somebody don't come to his assistance afore morning they won't find anything but a dead banker," and at this point Poker Jim laughed heartily as though he regarded the affair as being a first-class joke.

"Then Murdock was not in cahoots with you three?"

Both of the ruffians stared. This was a new idea to them.

"Well, if he was, all I've got to say is that the way we handled him was mighty rough."

"But there was some one back of Shanghai in this affair."

"Oh, yes, pard, I won't lie to you about 'em, 'cos I've made up my mind to give you a real deal. There is a party in the background—a man who put up the job, and Sam made up his mind to skin the boss by taking this plunder and dividing it 'tween him and us."

"And can't you guess who is this party?"

"Nary time! It might be Murdock, but I reckon it ain't."

"Well, that's all. You can depart, and I will go for Sam the first chance I get."

Poker Jim assisted Yreka Bill to rise, first with rude bandages stopping the bleeding from his wound, and then the two slowly made their way out of the glade.

"I reckon I am master of the situation," Talbot observed. "Ten thousand dollars! that is a pretty tidy little haul, and I could get away with it if it wasn't for the Old Hat customers. Poor fellows! it is life to them!"

He stooped and picked up the package, then took out the money. Oh, wonder! the bills were only imitation greenbacks, such as are used by store-keepers for advertising purposes. The real ten thousand was gone!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

NEVER in all Talbot's experience had he been so astonished as on the present occasion. He stood for a moment and stared at the worthless bits of paper in utter amazement.

"Well, upon my word, if this don't heat anything that I ever saw or heard!" he exclaimed. "The ideal here we have been fighting like tigers over this money, and it turns out to be worth less than the powder and lead that we have expended. And to think that these few worthless scraps of paper might have cost a human life! In fact, if the words of this fellow be true, it is possible that Murdock already has paid dearly for having this supposed money package in his possession; and that reminds me, I had better hurry back to town and release the banker, for the odds are that if he is not freed from his bonds he will be a dead man before morning."

By the aid of the lariat Dick ascended the rocks and hurried in the direction of Shasta Bar as fast as his legs could carry him, and as he hurried along he mused aloud, after the manner common to him, in regard to the situation.

"Now see the consequences of a whim," he muttered. "Just by accident I happened to meet that girl in San Francisco; in fact I interfered to protect her from insult before I knew anything about her, attracted merely by her beautiful face. Then accident put it in my power to again render her a service, or at least to serve her father, which is about the same thing, though I confess since the affair happened I have been much puzzled to decide whether I have been doing him a service or, on the contrary, interfering with his plans. Now, let me look into the probabilities of the thing and see exactly where Mr. Banker Murdock stands in this matter. He brings the ten thousand dollars with him from San Francisco to the mining concern, and being a prudent man he is careful not to reveal the fact to any one. But this rascal, Shanghai Sam, manages to discover it in some way and goes for the money. My impression was that Murdock himself had put Sam on the track and that he had planned the whole affair. He wanted the ten thousand dollars and arranged the robbery so as to get hold of the money and yet appear innocent of all wrong-doing in the matter. That is the reason why, after I returned the money, I played the spy upon my Scotch friend. I reasoned that if he was an honest man, after the trouble he had had in regard to the money, he would seize upon the first opportunity to relieve himself of all responsibility in the matter by giving the money package to the Old Hat people; so I laid in wait to see if he would visit the Old Hat works, and that is where I made a mistake. I ought to have kept track of Murdock and never have allowed him to get away from me after I had restored to him the money. As it is, I haven't the least idea of what he was up to from the time that I parted with him until he came to see the colonel and Smith. And the moment I found that he did not intend to pay the money over until the morning, I instantly came to the conclusion that my bold banker delayed in order to give time for some new trick to wrest the money from him; so I tracked him like his shadow, and when I saw the gang leave the house, I concluded I had guessed the banker's game. He had allowed himself to be robbed again. But now why did the ruffians go for Murdock in such a manner if they were in his pay? Because Sam had come to the conclusion that he would do a stroke of business on his own account? He threw overboard his employer and made a grab for the ten thousand. And

Murdock was just smart enough to imagine that his bravos might be up to some such game, and so he took the precaution to make sure of the precious money. I ought to have examined the package when it first came into my possession, but it doesn't matter much, though. I feel perfectly sure that the real ducats have never been in it. Now I think I know exactly how the game stands. I hate to come to the conclusion on account of the girl, in whom I take more than an ordinary interest, but my esteemed friend, Murdock, is a rascal of the first water, and I intend to make him pony up that little ten thousand. The Old Hat folks are honest men. It is their money; they need it badly; in fact its loss means utter ruin to them and the loss of their mine, so the banker must disgorge; there is no two ways about that! I don't doubt that he will cut up ugly about giving up his plunder, but he will have to come to it."

By the time that Talbot had worked this difficult problem out to his satisfaction he had arrived at the camp.

And when he came to Murdock's house he encountered the crowd coming from it, the men, who, pricked to it by the suspicious doctor, had rescued the banker from the dangerous position in which he had been placed by the ruffians.

Talbot questioned the first one of the rescuers whom he met and was soon in possession of all the facts.

"It is as I thought," Talbot murmured, as he turned about, satisfied that nothing more could be done at present. "Shanghai Bill was Murdock's tool and like many another such instrument he went in to beat his master. But the banker was no fool, and anticipating just such a thing he made the ten thousand safe. Murdock has the money and he must give it up!" And Talbot delivered this ultimatum with as much assurance as though he had all the power of the law at his back to force the banker into a settlement.

"To-morrow I will have to talk to Mr. Banker Murdock about this little ten thousand!" were the last words that came from Injun Dick's lips that night as he stretched himself upon his bunk. Ten minutes later he was sound asleep, and he slept as sleeps the mortal free from care.

He was up early in the morning, partook of breakfast—he boarded at the hotel—and then as he thought it was a little too early to make a business call, he strolled toward the outskirts of the town, wandered down to a little grassy nook by the river's bank, seated himself on a convenient boulder that up-reared it elf from mother-earth and fell to meditating upon the best way to bring the banker to terms.

But he had hardly got fairly seated when the sound of light footsteps and the rustle of a woman's dress fell upon his ears, and then Carlotta Murdock made her appearance.

The spot that Talbot had selected, being right in the rear of the bank, was a favorite resort of the girl, and she was in the habit of coming there for an hour or two each pleasant day.

She had approached so abruptly, coming around the sharp bend of the rocks, that she was within a few feet of Talbot before she discovered his presence, and when she did so, she halted and a bright blush crimsoned her cheeks.

Dick arose and bowed respectfully.

"Good-morning, miss," he said, perceiving that the girl was confused and wishing to relieve her embarrassment; "you are abroad for an early walk, I perceive, something like myself. I am going to call upon your father in relation to a little business matter this morning, but I fancied that it was rather early, and so I came down here to pass the time away. Will your father be at home this morning?"

"Yes, I believe so," answered Carlotta, recovering in a great measure from the confusion she had experienced. "He did not say anything to me about going away, and he always does so when he intends to be absent for any length of time."

"I shall have the pleasure of waiting upon him then shortly. I believe you had some unwelcome visitors last night."

"It was a terrible outrage!" Carlotta exclaimed, with flashing eyes. "If it had not been for the assistance which came so timely to our aid both my father and myself would surely have perished."

"The fellows were resolute in their pursuit of plunder, for I have an idea that it was the same gang who attacked the stage coach, but were baffled in their design to secure the ten thousand dollar package."

"I should not be surprised, but as I did not see them I am not in a condition to judge. Mr. Talbot, is it possible that you could do anything for my father this time?" she asked, abruptly, and with heightened color. "I know very well that it was you who brought back the money, and I am equally sure that it was you who first stopped the stage coach. Although I never saw you but once, yet both your figure and voice were familiar to me; your figure perhaps I might not have recognized, but a voice that I have once heard I never forget; it is a gift that I have, and not once in a thousand times can I be deceived, no matter how cleverly the voice may be disguised."

"We won't argue the matter, miss," Talbot replied, with a quiet smile, "for if you are so set about the matter, nothing that I might say would be apt to change your opinion. There's an old saying that 'one convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.' But, miss, there's one occasion when you did not do me justice."

"You refer to our first meeting in San Francisco?" she said, a burning blush crimsoning her cheeks.

"Yes, you thought that I was a party to the insult, when the truth of the matter was I interfered merely on your account. I was a stranger to the young men, I saw that they were flushed with drink, and ready for almost anything, and when you were spoken of I made up my mind that I would baffle the braggart in his design, if I could."

"Mr. Talbot, when I came to think the matter over, I was satisfied that I had acted unjustly to you. I am sorry now for it, and I hope you will pardon me."

"Oh, certainly, the acknowledgment is all I require."

"You will aid my father now, then?" she asked, eagerly, and fixing her brilliant eyes imploringly upon his face.

"I will do what I can, but the matter depends entirely upon your father."

Carlotta looked surprised; she did not understand how that could be.

"I will go and prepare him for your visit," she said, and then, with a grateful glance, retreated.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

MURDOCK was much amazed when his daughter returned, her face all in a glow, and informed him that she had just met Mr. Talbot and that that gentleman had said he was going to call upon Mr. Murdock, and that when she had asked him if he could not assist in some way in this new difficulty he had replied that it mainly depended upon Mr. Murdock himself.

A peculiar look appeared upon the banker's face, and it was apparent he was annoyed about the matter.

"Carlotta, why on earth did you ask this man to bother with my affairs?" he exclaimed.

The girl looked grieved; this was not the way in which she had imagined her exertions would be received.

"Why, father, I thought it would be for the best," she replied. "He brought back the money before—"

"Only to steal it again!" Murdock interrupted.

"Impossible!" the girl cried.

"Not at all! I feel quite satisfied that he was one of the masked men that pretty near killed me last night, and that is the reason why he is coming to see me this morning. He has got possession of the ten thousand dollars and he comes, probably, to propose some compromise by means of which he can retain the greater part of the plunder and yet escape punishment, but the game won't work; the camp is excited, the Vigilantes will be on the lookout, and the first thing this Talbot knows, he will find himself dangling from the end of a rope!"

"Oh, father, how can you say such a thing!" cried the girl, indignantly, her face flushing scarlet with excitement. "Mr. Talbot is a gentleman and an honest man too, I am sure of it! If he had wanted the money why did he not keep it when he had it safely in his hands and there was not the least clew to indicate that he was the man that stopped the coach? Father, the accusation that you have just made is monstrous, and there is not the least bit of proof to support it!"

"Upon my word, you seem to take a strange interest in this fellow," Murdock observed, a scowl upon his sallow features, as he noticed the look of honest indignation upon his daughter's face.

"Oh, no, father, do not misunderstand me," she answered, speaking calmly, yet blushing most furiously. "I do not take any interest in him at all, except that I am grateful that he, a stranger, should take the trouble to be of use to you, father, and as to his being in league with these men the idea is to me absurd!"

"How so? Why should he be any better than the rest of the men who float about these camps in the mountains and make a living by fleecing the miners of their hard-earned gold, cheating at cards, and resorting to the knife and pistol, open force, when secret cunning fails? Can't you see by his dress what kind of a man he is? Why, Carlotta, the fellow never did an honest day's work in his life and he never will either, as long as he can get a living by robbing honest men who are not up to his tricks. He's a sharp, girl, a card-sharp, a gambler; that is his trade and the only means he has of making a living. He is rather superior in looks and manners to the common run of black-legs, but that only makes him more dangerous, and when men of his class have a run of bad luck, so that they are unable to make a living at the gaming-table it is the most natural thing in the world for them to take to the highway and turn road-agent."

"Father, it is not possible for me to believe that this man can be as black as you paint him," Carlotta exclaimed, in a tone which plainly indicated she believed firmly every word that she uttered.

"My dear girl, just consider what utter folly it is for you to put your judgment against mine!" Murdock replied, impatiently. "You are a girl fresh from boarding school, without any knowledge of the world, except what you have gained from books, which, as a rule, generally distort real life amazingly, while I am an old, practical man of the world, used to all sorts of tricks and traps. Now then I appeal to your own judgment—I will leave it to you to decide which should be the better judge in regard to this man, you or I?"

The banker thought that he had put the case so strongly that the girl would be obliged to confess that he was far more likely to be right than she, but Murdock, for all his knowledge of the world, knew very little of womankind, for with the craft of her sex Carlotta easily evaded the issue and at a breath overturned his arguments.

Instead of attacking him in front, she "flanked" his position and utterly routed him.

"Experience counts for nothing in such a case as this, father!" she declared. "We women do not always trust to the cold dictates of judgment; we are creatures of impulse and often jump by pure instinct to a just opinion, and so, despite all you say, I am sure that Mr. Talbot is no such man as you have described."

"My dear girl, he is a gambler, a man utterly unworthy to come into decent society!" Murdock exclaimed, angrily, annoyed that his words had failed to produce any impression. "Just think of it, Carlotta, a man who gains the bread he eats not by honest toil, but by card-playing!"

"But, father, everybody plays cards here in California," the girl answered, seemingly not much horrified by the statement. "In the East, I know, a gentleman who plays cards is thought to be on the highway to ruin, but since I have been west of the mountains every one speaks of it as though it was a common thing, and no one seems to see any harm in the practice either. Why, father, you play yourself, for I heard you tell that old gentleman, General Jackson Blair, how four of you once sat up the whole night playing poker at Yreka, and when morning came you were five thousand dollars ahead of the game, and he laughed and said it reminded him of how he used to clean out the boys—that is what he said—during the Mexican campaign."

Murdock looked decidedly annoyed at this revelation. In truth, the banker was an expert card-player and especially prided himself upon his skill in playing that game, so popular on the Pacific slope, known as poker, but being reserved by nature, he seldom referred to the subject, thinking it for the best that the world at large should not know of his proficiency in this direction.

"Oh, you misunderstood the conversation!" he exclaimed, with a most decided shake of the head.

"That is not possible, father," she replied, equally decided. "I was in the parlor while you and the general were outside on the piazza smoking. It was one day after dinner, and from where I sat I could distinctly hear every word of the conversation. It was soon after we arrived at San Francisco, and I remember that I was amazed at the time, for I had not then got used to Californian ways, and I thought it perfectly dreadful that you should play cards."

Murdock saw that he was fairly caught, and that it was impossible for him to get out of it, but his ready wit suggested a way out of the difficulty.

"Ah, yes, come to think of it I guess you are right about the matter, but it is so seldom that I ever play cards that I had entirely forgotten the circumstance," he said. "But you must remember, Carlotta, there is a great deal of difference between gentlemen and business men, like myself and the colonel, indulging once in a while in a little social game just to pass the time away, and the regular, professional playing of a black-leg and card-sharps, who make a living by fleecing foolish men who don't know any better than to play with them. Such men as the general and myself play once in a great while for amusement, but such fellows as this Talbot make a business of it."

"But you play for money, father, too, just the same as the others do," responded the girl, whose clear ideas in regard to the matter were not to be changed by any such sophistry.

"Yes, a trifle of course, just to make the game interesting," Murdock admitted, reluctantly.

"It seems to me, father, that there isn't much difference."

"That is because you are a girl and do not understand such matters!" the banker exclaimed, impatiently.

"That may be true," and Carlotta's proud lip curled impatiently, "for I certainly do not comprehend that there can be much difference between the gentlemen who play cards for sport, and those who do it as a business, provided that both play for money. Really, I think that if there is anything wrong in the practice, the men

who are not forced by dire necessity to play that they may live, are by far the most to blame."

"Your ideas are crude, child, and you must get such foolish notions out of your head!" Murdock said, his tone quite harsh. "For heaven's sake don't say such things in public or you will make yourself the laughing-stock of the town."

The girl drew herself up proudly while her eyes flashed with scornful fires.

"You need not give yourself any uneasiness on that point, father," she replied. "Such a thing is not likely to happen, and if it should, it would not swerve me in the least from what I believed to be right. I only speak of the man as I have found him. Mr. Talbot may be a black-leg—he may be all that is bad and vile, but as far as I know he has acted like a gentleman and an honest man, and I am sure, father, after the manner in which he has acted toward you, you should be the last one in the world to say a word against him!" and then with the air of a tragedy queen she left the room, going upstairs to her own apartment.

"Curse the infernal scoundrel!" cried the banker, in a rage, springing to his feet. "I believe he has bewitched the girl! What an obstinate, headstrong jade she is too! How the spirit of the mother lives again in her! I am going to have trouble; strange what a mistake I made in regard to her. I thought she was so mild and amiable that I could easily bend her to my will, but I fear she is going to prove as obstinate as a mule. Why on earth did this Talbot trouble himself about my affairs?"

And just as the banker put this question, the door opened and Talbot appeared.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE INTERVIEW.

MURDOCK had one of those cast-iron-like faces which rarely betray the secret of its owner's emotions, and although the sight of Talbot was as wormwood to the banker, and in his heart he wished his visitor a hundred miles off, yet he nodded to him as politely as if he was a most welcome visitor.

Talbot, on his part, smiled upon entering, as though the banker was the dearest friend that he had in all the world, and yet our hero had a shrewd suspicion that Murdock was a rascal of the deepest dye; it was an idea that he did not yield willingly to either, for the sake of the girl; she was such a paragon of a woman that he hated to be obliged to come to the conclusion that her nearest relative was a scoundrel of the first water.

"Can I have a few words with you in private, Mr. Murdock?" Talbot asked.

"I am at your service, sir," the banker replied.

"You will excuse my helping myself to a chair, I hope?" Talbot remarked, drawing a chair up to the table, upon the other side of which the banker sat, and seating himself.

"Certainly, sir."

"I presume that I may speak without fear of being overheard?"

"Oh, yes, no danger of that, provided you speak in a moderate tone of voice."

"I understand that you were troubled by some unwelcome visitors last night."

"Yes, the scoundrels! if it had not been for timely assistance, I should have been a dead man before morning."

And from the manner in which he spoke Talbot felt sure that the indignation the banker displayed was real and not assumed.

"If I heard the correct account, the rascals were concealed in the house, overpowered you when you entered, gagged and bound you, then went through the premises."

"That is the way it happened."

"The main object of the raid, I presume, was the ten-thousand-dollar package, belonging to the Old Hat Mining Company which was in your care?"

"Yes, sir; that is what they were after, and they managed to secure it, too." Murdock was not surprised that Talbot knew about the package, for the robbery was the common talk of the town.

"The adventures of the money-package would make a good subject for a romance," Talbot suggested. "First taken from you by the road-agents, then mysteriously restored, and now as mysteriously stolen."

Murdock cast a covert, yet searching glance, from under his bushy eyebrows at his visitor, as much as to question what this prelude meant.

"Yes; it is a very strange affair," he observed, slowly.

"You are right in saying so; it is a deuced strange affair; about the strangest that I ever was mixed up with, and yet I have seen a great deal of life."

Murdock looked amazed.

"I don't really understand how the matter concerns you at all," he said at last, after quite a long pause.

"Of course not, but you will after I explain the matter," Talbot remarked, in that light and airy way in which he delighted sometimes. "Just by accident I ran across a friend early this morning who intrusted me with a commis-

sion. This party happened to run foul of the men who robbed you last night. They were in a lonely spot up in the hills, dividing their spoils, when my friend concluded to take a hand in the game. He went in and cleaned the gang out—"

"Why, there were three of them!" the banker exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Exactly; your count is quite correct; there were three in the party, ugly customers to handle too; not the kind of men, you know, to let go their grip on ten thousand dollars without kicking up quite a time. In fact, I understand there was considerable of a fuss."

"I hope some of the scoundrels were killed!" cried Murdock, with bitter emphasis.

"I don't blame you for wishing it, for they intended to fix you for keeps."

"The black-hearted villains!"

"Yes; it was an extremely unhandsome thing for them to do. They evidently intended to murder you."

"Oh, yes; there isn't any doubt about that; I hope your friend was lucky enough to kill some of them?" and Murdock fixed his shrewd eyes inquiringly upon Talbot's face. He guessed easily enough that the man who had dared single-handed to encounter the three bravos was no other than his visitor.

"No, I believe not; the trouble did not last long; two of the band were disabled immediately, and the chief of the party, having had the fight taken out of him by a pretty severe wound, took to his heels and gave leg-bail."

Murdock looked at Talbot in wonder. What manner of man was this who could perform such doughty deeds?

"Always build a bridge of gold for a flying enemy," is an old Spanish proverb, and it is a good one too, for a defeated foe, if pressed too closely, might turn in desperation and retrieve the fortunes of the day. So my friend, having secured the spoils, was satisfied to allow the fellows to get away."

"You don't mean to say that you recaptured the ten thousand-dollar package?" cried Murdock, amazed.

"You mean my friend, of course."

"Yes, yes, it doesn't matter; I understand all about that; I'm no fool!"

"You have guessed correctly; the prize was wrested from Shanghai Sam and his gang, but it's a sort of a Dead-Sea apple business," Talbot responded. "Here's the package," and he drew the envelope from an inside pocket of his coat and threw it upon the table. "The real money is missing. The contents are only imitation stuff, advertising greenbacks, worth about two bits a bushel."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the banker, an expression of great amazement upon his face.

"Oh, yes, there's the package; examine for yourself."

Murdock pulled out the bills; at the first glance they looked like the genuine article, but an examination instantly disclosed their true character.

"Well, the rascals got away with the money after all," the banker remarked, with a sigh and a doleful shake of the head.

"Oh, no," replied Talbot, quietly, and fixing upon the banker a scrutinizing glance that he did not at all relish.

"But the money is gone, and of course the scoundrels must have taken it, although I do not understand why they took the trouble to put this trash in the envelope."

"They didn't examine the envelope at all; they didn't have time."

"You took the money out then, and put these dummies in the package?" and Murdock looked surprised.

"No, sir, the package was just as it is now when it came into my possession; I examined it, partly from curiosity, and partly because I did not like to lug so large a sum as ten thousand dollars around with me in this shape."

"Well, this is really a most mysterious affair!" Murdock exclaimed.

"Very!"

"I don't understand it at all."

"Well, the way things look now the Old Hat folks are going to be badly left on this ten thousand-dollar question."

"Yes, it certainly looks like it," Murdock observed, with a sigh. "And I really feel sorry for them too; they are wise men and they need this money so badly; in fact, I am sadly afraid that the loss of this ten thousand will burst up the company."

"It is too bad, but maybe you will be able to help them out," Talbot remarked, glancing at the banker in a peculiar way.

"Oh, no, I couldn't do anything for them; I am a poor man," and Murdock betrayed considerable nervousness as he spoke.

"Ah, yes, I see, I was wrong then; fact is, Mr. Murdock, I thought you had ten thousand dollars deposited in a bank in San Francisco that you could draw on at sight."

A short, quick breath came from the banker, then his jaws shut together with an audible click, and his hard face looked sterner than ever.

"I really do not understand why you should imagine such a thing," he said, after quite a

pause, slowly, and with a touch of defiance in both voice and manner.

"Oh, I'm kind of an odd genius and am apt to imagine all kinds of things. You see, when this package came into my hands and I found out that there had been some gum-game going on, I came to the conclusion that the ten thousand dollars had never been in the package at all. Shanghai Sam and his gang were hired by a certain party to go for the coach on purpose to secure this money-package, but the party who hired the desperadoes was shrewd enough to suspect that after they got the ten thousand into their hands, they were quite capable of keeping it for themselves, and that in fact was the very game they played, and so a dummy package was fixed. The main idea of course was to make away with the money."

"Upon my life, Mr. Talbot, you are about the coolest hand that I think I ever met with, even in California, this land of strange characters!" exclaimed Murdock, assuming an indignant tone. "If I understand your meaning correctly, you insinuate that I have made away with this ten thousand dollars."

"Oh, no, you've got it all right," replied the other.

"It is an infamous lie!" cried the banker, springing to his feet.

"Not a bit of it; it is Gospel truth, and you know it!" replied Talbot, also rising and shaking his finger in menace in the banker's face.

"Leave my house! how dare you insult me by such a charge?"

"Banker Murdock, since I have got mixed up in this matter, I mean to see it through. I will give you four-and-twenty hours to make that money good, and if you don't—"

"Well, what then?" blustered Murdock.

"Look out for yourself, that's all! So-long!" and then Talbot departed, leaving the banker a prey to the most violent anger, not unmixed with fear, for from what he had already seen of the man he judged Talbot would be a terrible foe.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

As soon as the door closed behind Talbot, the banker shook his clinched fist fiercely at the unconscions piece of wood and cried in a voice hoarse with anger:

"You infernal scoundrel! if I had my way I would put you into a pine coffin inside of ten minutes!"

But words such as these seldom damage anybody, and so when the first heat of his passion was over, Murdock sat down to reflect upon the situation.

"Four-and-twenty hours he gives me to make the ten thousand dollars good to the Old Hat concern," he muttered. "And suppose I don't make it good, what then, eh?"

For quite a little while the banker puzzled over this knotty point.

"He suspects a great deal, but what can he prove? That's the question, and if he dares to openly charge me with wrong-doing in the matter, why shouldn't my denial have as much weight as his assertion? It ought to have more, as I am a man that amounts to something, while no one knows anything about this fellow at all. But, stop a bit! is that what he means?" And the banker caressed his wiry beard with his hand in a reflective sort of way, and then he shook his head, gravely. "I am afraid that it isn't," he observed at last. "This rascal is a regular devil of a fellow, perfectly capable of doing almost anything, as witness his blundering into this affair which does not concern him in the least. He is just the kind of man to take the idea into his head of holding me to a personal account, the ten thousand dollars or my life, in fact, to simmer the matter right down," and then Murdock looked around him anxiously, while a shiver ran over his frame.

"Of course I always go armed to the teeth, but what chance would I stand in a personal encounter with such a desperado as this fellow? Not much, I am afraid. If he was able to whip Shanghai Sam and his two bravos in single fight, as it is plainly evident he did, or else he would not have got possession of the money-package, he would certainly not have much trouble in disposing of me, for I am not much of a warrior. I can plainly see that it is going to be a desperate struggle, and I must use all my energies or else I cannot hope to win, but how shall I proceed? I am perplexed; this man is no ordinary customer and I don't exactly see how I can get at him. It would not be of much use to hire tough fellows to waylay him, for if he has cleaned out Shanghai and his gang, he would be apt to get away with any others that I might put upon his track. Where can I find a weapon that will produce any impression upon this demon?"

Satan they say always helps his own; the adage is a very old one, and most people believe that there is a great deal of truth in it, in fact, that has been the general impression of the world at large since the earliest ages, and on the present occasion, as if to confirm the truth of the saying, into the room walked Leonard De Weister.

The young blood looked about the same as when we introduced him to the notice of the reader in the early part of our narrative, excepting that he had doffed his fashionable clothing for a rough suit more fitted for the mountain region.

Murdock had only a slight acquaintance with the young man, but knowing his position and wealth, the banker received him with the utmost cordiality.

"Why, Mr. De Welcher, this is an unexpected pleasure!" Murdock declared, rising and shaking hands with the visitor in a manner calculated to make him feel at home immediately. "When did you leave the city?"

"A couple of weeks ago; I have been traveling leisurely, taking a good look at the country. Fact is, I am on a sort of a prospecting tour. I've a little money to invest, and I thought of putting some into a mine or two," the young man replied, accepting the seat which the banker had been eager to offer.

"I haven't the least doubt that you will make a good thing of it. I really believe you have a golden touch like the king that we read of in ancient history, for everything that you go into always turns out well; it doesn't seem to be any trouble for a man like yourself to make money."

"Well, I presume I haven't any reason to complain as far as that goes," De Welcher replied, complacently. "I think I can see as far into a millstone as the next man."

"A deuced sight further," Murdock exclaimed, "for you take hold of things that never paid anybody, and the moment you assume command the wealth begins to pour in. By Jove! I wish I could operate as well."

"Do you really? Well, I'll be happy to give you a point at any time, although up in this country you ought to be much better posted in regard to men and matters than I."

"I believe I am pretty well posted."

"By the way, I saw a man coming out of your door, just before I came in—"

"Yes, his name is Talbot; do you know him?"

"I met him in Frisco once."

"Indeed? That's strange! I never happened to run across him there."

"Well, I never met him but once, but the circumstances were so peculiar that they served to fix the man in my memory."

"He is rather out of the common run in his appearance, and when once seen is not apt to be easily forgotten."

"Mr. Murdock, there is something in connection with this man which I think you ought to know, if you do not know it already, and I don't believe you do," De Welcher said, abruptly.

Murdock was surprised by this speech, and wondered what on earth was coming.

"As I have said, the circumstances under which I met this fellow were extremely peculiar, and your daughter, Carlotta, was mixed up in the affair," he continued.

"Well, I knew my daughter had met this Talbot, but I was not aware under what circumstances."

"You do not know, I presume, that there was a love affair between them?" De Welcher asked, bluntly.

The banker started in amazement, for he had never dreamed of such a thing, though now that he thought the matter over he remembered that Carlotta had been strangely embarrassed when she had first spoken of Talbot.

"Oh, it is the truth!" the young man hastened to assert, "I am in a position to know all the facts in the case, and I can assure you that there is a strong probability that you will wake up some fine morning and find that your daughter has taken French leave with this gentlemanly desperado."

"Is it possible?" cried Murdock, speculating upon the new aspect that this information gave to his affairs.

"I am quite sure that there isn't the least doubt about the matter. They have kept it quiet, of course, for both of them know very well how you would regard such a thing."

Now, confidently as De Welcher spoke, the truth was that he didn't really know anything certain about the matter at all, but was making the story up from the malicious imaginings of his own brain.

After his ignominious defeat by Talbot he had puzzled considerably over the matter.

Why on earth should this stranger interfere in a matter that concerned him not? He had discussed the affair with his two companions as they rode to the city, and one of them had suggested that there might be a love passage between the pair. De Welcher immediately jumped to the conclusion that this theory was correct, as he remarked, "these dashy, handsome girls often yield to such strange caprices."

Then an hour or two later, happening to pass the hotel where the banker and his daughter were residing, he noticed Talbot lounging in the neighborhood. And from this circumstance, which was purely accidental, De Welcher came to the conclusion that Talbot was waiting to have an interview with the girl, and then he made up his mind that he would break up the intimacy between the two, no matter how great the trouble or the cost.

He hurried to a private detective office and put spies at once upon Talbot's track, but Dick's abrupt departure for the north put a stop to this, but when the spies reported—for Talbot made no secret of his destination—that their game was bound for Shasta Bar, De Welcher was certain that his suspicions were correct, and so, as soon as he could arrange his affairs, he too started for the north; and about the first thing he saw after arriving at the mining-camp was Talbot coming from the banker's house.

Determined to strike while the iron was hot and put a spoke in Talbot's wheel as soon as possible, he immediately called upon the banker.

"I am really astounded," Murdock remarked, "for I must confess to you, my dear De Welcher, I had not the slightest suspicion of any such thing, and I really am unable to believe that it can be so. I think there must be some mistake about the matter."

"Oh, no, there isn't!" De Welcher persisted, "you will find that the information is strictly correct. I have no interest in the matter, of course, either one way or the other, only I think it is a shame that a girl like your daughter should throw herself away on any such worthless vagabond as this Talbot!"

"My dear sir, I appreciate your warning, and am very glad indeed that you have taken the trouble to put me on my guard." Then Murdock arose and shook hands with the young man.

"Don't mention it! I only did what I thought was right in the matter. I shouldn't like a sister of mine to be enticed away by any such rascal."

"I will be on my guard; you can rest assured of that, thanks to your warning."

They shook hands again and De Welcher departed, Murdock giving him a pressing invitation, as he bowed him out, to make his house his head-quarters while he remained in town.

"Aha!" exclaimed the banker when the door closed, "now, Dick Talbot, I think I have you!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COLONEL'S STORY.

THREE more thoroughly disgusted men than the trio that controlled the Old Hat mine, could not have been found in all the town of Shasta Bar on the morning that succeeded the night when Murdock and his daughter had been so roughly treated by the desperadoes.

The three sat in council in the shanty attached to the mine.

They had just come in after a long and wearisome search for the unknown robbers. Each one had headed a party and gone in a different direction, but not the slightest sign of the marauders had been discovered.

"I tell you what it is; these are rough lines, boys!" the colonel ejaculated.

"Rough! it is utter ruin!" the doctor exclaimed.

"Oh, come, Doc, don't give up the ship yet awhile," Smith observed, encouragingly.

"Don't let us cry until we are hurt. Who knows? We may be able to pull through yet, although I am ready to own that things do look awful squally ahead."

"Pull through!" cried Allcash with a groan, "why, there ain't one chance in ten thousand for us to do that."

"Say only one chance in a hundred thousand, mebber we'll be able to get hold of it."

"A chance to be struck by lightning," groaned the doctor; "that is about all the chance we have got."

"Don't take it so hard, doctor," the colonel remarked. "S'pose that the worst does come; s'pose we lose the mine and all the money that we have put into it, we have got health and life left, and we can easily make another strike."

"Certainly! that's the kind of talk; so brace up, doctor, and be a man!" Smith exclaimed.

"Yes, boys; but I ain't worried so much about the money as I am that we should be choused out of it in such a deuced ugly way. That is where the shoe pinches," the doctor replied. "You see, boys, I ain't had the least bit of peace since I found out how Murdock was bringing that money from Frisco. He's a snake in the grass, gentlemen, I tell you so, and don't you forget it."

"Oh, now, Allcash, I think you are a little out in this matter," the colonel observed. "I admit the man has been infernally careless in bringing the money as he did, and I myself had an idea he was only too willing to be robbed, but this second time I don't see how he could be blamed."

"Why didn't he bring the money and pay it right over into our hands the moment he got hold of it?" Allcash demanded.

"Yes, that is what he ought to have done; there's no two ways about it!" Smith coincided.

"That is so, gentlemen; I wish he had, and I've no doubt that he wishes it, too, about this time," said Perkins.

"Boys, I can't get it out of my mind that the whole thing ain't a put-up job to rob us of our ducats!" exclaimed Allcash. "The more I think of it, the more I feel sure that Murdock had a finger in the pie."

The other two shook their heads.

"You don't believe it?"

"No, I can't bring myself to it," the colonel replied.

"Nor I either," said Smith. "The first time I had a suspicion that he was in cahoots with the fellow that got away with the money on the road, and was going to have a share of the plunder for giving information in regard to it; but this last time if we hadn't come in as we did, the man would have been dead before morning, and if it was a game, is it likely that he would have allowed himself to be tied up in such a way?—for of course he had no suspicions that we were coming; in fact, at such an hour no one was likely to disturb him."

"You can't tell that, Smith; maybe he had it all arranged for somebody to come in and release him, and we upset the little arrangement by getting in ahead."

"That might be," the colonel observed; "but still, Allcash, I am inclined to think you are over suspicious in this matter. You are inclined to be suspicious by nature."

"I don't deny it," responded the doctor, "and it is a good thing for a man to be constituted in that way. The man who is always suspicious is always on the watch and he is not apt to let any one get the best of him. If you remember, gentlemen, I never had much opinion of this Murdock. I have always regarded him as a man who would not scruple to take an unfair advantage if he could do so without being detected, but he was the only man in the region who could attend to our business, and so when this Frisco trip was proposed, I didn't make any objection, although, if you remember, boys, at the time I suggested that it would be a good idea if one of us kept him company so as to look after the money."

"So you did, and the colonel and myself were a couple of jacks that we didn't heed your warning," Smith observed. "But I thought—and I reckon the colonel did also—that it would be kinder mean—it would look as if we didn't trust the man and was putting a spy upon him."

"Yes, that is about the English of it, and that is one reason why I thought it had better be left undone; besides if the man was smart enough to play the rascal, he most certainly would be shrewd enough to carry his game through, even if he was watched."

Smith nodded assent; the reasoning seemed to him to be sound, but Allcash was not so easily satisfied.

"Ah, boys, if you had only been willing to have had me go along with him, I will warrant you he would not have been able to escape my vigilance."

"Gentlemen, it is too late now to talk about what we *might* have done," the colonel remarked. "The question before the meeting is what shall we do now?"

"Use all our energies to track the robbers!" exclaimed the doctor, recovering a little from the despair which had overwhelmed him. "And at the same time put a watch upon Murdock, so as to be able to discover if he is holding communications with the fellows that got the money."

"That is a capital ideal" observed Smith.

"The Doc has got the best head of any of us for this business, after all," said the colonel.

"Ah, Perkins; if you knew how close to the bone this thing has cut, you wouldn't be surprised at anything that I might do," All-cash responded. "If this ten thousand dollars had come to hand, this mine would have been the making of us, but as it is now, I can't see anything ahead but utter ruin."

"Well, we are as badly off, as far as that goes as you are," Smith suggested.

"Yes, we are all in the same box, but Smith and I are not kicking up quite so much row about it."

"It isn't the loss of money only, gentlemen," the little doctor answered, with a doleful shake of the head; "there is something more; there is a little bit of romance connected with it, although I am not exactly the kind of man that would be picked out as a victim to the tender passion, but it is sure-enough fact, gentlemen. I have been engaged to be married to a lady in the East for over ten years. She comes of good stock, her folks are all rich, and, naturally, she occupies a splendid position in society. Her father has wanted her to marry one of his cronies, a retired bank president, very wealthy and fully as old as himself, and so when I came a-courting he looked with anything but a favorable eye upon my suit. He told his daughter plumply that I was a poor scamp of a fortune-hunter and all that I wanted of her was her money; she is wealthy in her own right, having inherited her mother's estate. Of course she indignantly denied the charge, and it angered me so much that I vowed I never would ask her to marry me until I had made a stake big enough to give her a position in life of which no one need be ashamed. For ten years she has kept faith with me and waited patiently for fortune to smile upon yours truly, and now, just as the prize, for which I have toiled so long, seemed to be within my grasp, this accursed affair takes place and I am set back to exactly where I started. Why, gentlemen, just think of it, just put yourselves in my place; could anything more unfortunate befall a man?"

"Oh, yes," remarked the colonel, in a quiet way, and yet there was something in the deep tones of his voice that immediately attracted the attention of the others. "I can tell you of a case far worse than this that you, doctor, have recited."

Both of his companions listened attentively, for they guessed it would be worth their while.

"I knew of a man who did not marry until he had passed forty, and then he married a pretty young girl just eighteen," he began. "The man was rather an odd customer; he was an officer in the army and had served his country since he graduated from West Point; he was considerable of a student, and had mixed very little in female society, and so when he fell in love with the girl he believed her to be an angel. Some of his friends tried to dissuade him from the match on the plea that she was too young for him, but he laughed at the idea as absurd. He married the lady, and for some six months enjoyed most perfect bliss; then, the war broke out, and he was ordered to the front. Sorrowfully he tore himself from the arms of his weeping wife and obeyed the call of duty."

"In a few months, in the midst of the campaign, he received word that a baby daughter had been born to him. As soon as military affairs would allow him so to do he hastened homeward on the wings of love. And, gentlemen, what do you suppose this anxious husband and father found when he reached his abode? You will never guess!

A deserted, dishonored home! the angel wife had fled with the husband's man of business, a canny Scotchman who for years had attended to the soldier's property. She had fled and taken her child with her, and for all his search the injured husband never found a clew to the fugitives. He would have gone mad but that in liquor he found the lethe of the fable that drowns remembrances. Smith, produce the whisky—it's a long time 'tween drinks!"

A hard-drawn breath came from the listeners.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MURDOCK'S LITTLE GAME.

AGAIN the shades of night had fallen upon the town of Shasta Bar. Talbot having dispatched his supper, was sitting outside the hotel enjoying a cigar when Murdock came up the street.

"Hallo; there's my mutton, now," murmured Dick, perceiving the banker approaching. "I wonder if he will conclude that discretion is the better part of valor, and come down without trouble, or will he be mule-headed enough to show fight? If he does, I shall be obliged to put the screws on him in an extremely unpleasant manner—probably in a way that he will despise."

Murdock had his eyes on Talbot before the latter caught sight of him, which was not strange, as he had come out for the express purpose of finding our hero, and as he approached, his thoughts also resolved themselves into words.

"Aha! there is my gentleman," he muttered. "He doubtless thinks that he has got me foul, but I reckon I will soon show him that I am up to a trick or two of which he little dreams."

When he came up to Talbot, Murdock nodded in the most friendly manner.

"Good-evening," he said, "have you seen anything of Colonel Perkins to-night?"

"No; I reckon he hasn't come down-town yet."

"I wanted to find out if he had got any news of those thieving scoundrels yet."

"Don't think he has; haven't heard anything about it, and the chances are that I won't, for it would be all over town if any clew had been discovered."

"The scouting parties had been out all day, I believe?"

"Yes; they came in just before sundown."

"And no clew at all?" Murdock exclaimed, as if he was unable to believe that such could be the case.

"Not the slightest."

"Did you join in the search?"

"Nary time! I haven't lost any scoundrels, and therefore didn't feel interested; besides, it is rather out of my line; there are so many sharps in the town that understand all about scouting and tracking, that a modest man like myself feels abashed and don't like to volunteer."

And from the way in which Talbot spoke, the banker came to the conclusion that the sport had a supreme contempt for the men who had conducted the scouting-parties.

"I think I will walk up as far as the colonel's place and see if he has any news," Murdock remarked, "and if you haven't anything better to do I shall be glad of your company."

Now, Murdock was about the last man in the world whom Talbot would have picked out for a companion, and as he felt pretty sure the banker thought about the same as he did in regard to the matter, he surmised that Murdock had some especial purpose in view in requesting his company, and so, instead of respectfully declining, as under ordinary circumstances he would have done, he replied that he didn't care if he did "go along."

As soon as they were well out of ear-shot of the klungers congregated around the hotel the banker commenced operations.

"By the way, Mr. Talbot, you are acquainted with my daughter, I believe?"

"Yes, I am slightly," the other replied, rather astonished at the remark, for it was altogether unexpected.

"I mean you were acquainted with her before she came to the Bar—you met her in San Francisco?"

"Yes," answered Dick, wondering what this was going to lead to, for he fully understood that Murdock was not speaking at random.

"I didn't know until to-day that you and she were old friends."

"Egad! I don't know it now!" Talbot ejaculated. "I certainly met Miss Carlotta in Frisco, but it was only a chance meeting, and it is putting it rather too strong to say that we are old friends."

"Oh, well, you know girls have queer ideas about such things," the banker responded, in the most genial manner, and looking at Talbot in a meaning way as much as to say he understood all about the matter. "My daughter intimates that you did her a great service, and I can see from the way in which she speaks that you made a wonderful impression upon her. She is young and romantic, you know, just fresh from boarding-school, just about the age and temperament for such a thing to produce a deep impression."

A peculiar look came into Talbot's eyes, for he thought he could guess the banker's game already, little as had been said.

"I am very much obliged to you for the service you did my girl, and I should have spoken about the matter before, only the full details of the affair did not come to my knowledge until to-day. I met a party right from San Francisco who knew all about the thing."

Then it suddenly occurred to Talbot that he had seen De Welcher in the camp that afternoon, and he immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was from that gentleman that Murdock had procured his information.

"The matter didn't amount to anything," he observed, carelessly.

"You may regard it in that light, but my daughter doesn't, and to such a girl as she is, an event of this kind may be the turning-point of her life."

"Mr. Murdock, I am a plain man and I do not admire beating about the bush!" Talbot exclaimed, abruptly. "What are you driving at? what is your little game?"

"My little game?" responded the banker, endeavoring to look amazed.

"Exactly; your little game. That is good, plain English, isn't it? Anybody possessed of an average amount of common sense ought to be able to understand what I mean. You don't take me for a fool, do you?"

Murdock at once hastened to disclaim any such idea.

"I have as much brains as the common run of sharps, I think, and I know well enough that you are not the kind of a man to waste your breath. Now then, let me have it, plain as you can give it to me; what do you mean?"

"Talbot, you are such a deuced odd fellow!" and Murdock clapped him on the back in what he intended to be a jocular manner. "I find that a man has to be well acquainted with you to understand you at all. Now, some of the boys 'round the town say you are an iron-hearted chap, and that the man that gets in your grip had better look out for himself; but I am sure they wrong you."

"Well, I don't know about that. Although men say I am a good friend, yet they are equally ready to declare me an implacable enemy."

And Talbot's brow clouded as he spoke, for back to his remembrance came thoughts of the bloody scenes which had occurred in and around Cinnabar City in the not far distant past.

"That is just the kind of man that I like!" Murdock declared. "I wouldn't give a cent for one of your soft, dough-like fellows. But to come to the point, Talbot, I understand that there is a little sort of a love affair between you and my girl—"

"What?" cried Dick, thoroughly astonished.

"Oh, it's all right," responded the banker, good-naturedly, and again patting Talbot on the back in the most familiar manner. "I am not at all offended because you kept the matter dark, but I confess I was considerably astonished, for I never suspected that my puss of a girl had a tender feeling for anybody, and I will frankly own to you, Mr. Talbot, I had other views for her, but it doesn't matter. I thought such a girl as Carlotta was a match for any man in the land, and I will admit I hoped she would capture some bonanza millionaire; but that is nothing, now. I have no objection to the match, and you can go ahead with your wooing with my free consent."

"Has your daughter confessed to you that there was a love affair between us, or owned that she cared for me?"

"Oh, no, I have never questioned her in regard to the matter. She is a shy thing—takes after her mother in that respect, and I didn't wish to worry her."

"Then, supposing I love your daughter, you have no objection to my suit?"

"Not the slightest! I will admit, Talbot, that you are not exactly the man I would have chosen if I had been looking up a husband for her; but then a father and daughter seldom think alike about such matters, so go ahead, old fellow! I will not throw any obstacles in the way."

"You are perfectly willing?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I reckon, Murdock, you wouldn't be if it wasn't for this Old Hat mine affair," Talbot remarked. "Come! be honest about the thing now; if you didn't think I had the under-grip, would you be apt to look with favor upon a union between your daughter and such a man as I am?"

"Well, possibly not."

"In fact, you would see me in the furthest corner of perdition before you would for a moment countenance such a thing?"

"What is the use of discussing the matter?" exclaimed Murdock, impatiently. "Circumstances alter cases, you know. As long as I am willing, why should you, or anybody else, pry into the reasons that induce me to give my consent?"

"It does put you into a rather ugly position for any one to examine closely into the matter. It isn't pleasant for any man to be obliged to sell his child to a man he hates in order to get out of a tight place."

"Oh, see here, Talbot, that is putting it too strong!" Murdock remonstrated.

"Not a bit! That is your little game, and it won't work, Banker Murdock!" Talbot replied. "You say men call me iron-hearted, and in this matter you will find that I am so. That ten thousand dollars must be restored, or you must take the consequences."

"You have misunderstood me, sir!" exclaimed the banker, attempting to appear dignified.

"Oh, no, I hain't; I understand you well enough, although I didn't give you credit for being such a thoroughly infamous scoundrel as this affair proves you are."

Murdock got very red in the face, stopped short, and then turned away.

"You shall hear from me soon, sir!" he cried, threateningly, as he moved away.

His scheme had failed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ACCUSATION.

TALBOT gazed after the banker with a look of supreme contempt upon his expressive face.

"I think that is the biggest scoundrel that I ever encountered," he muttered. "And is it really possible that such a divine girl as Carlotta can be the daughter of this vile wretch?" and he shook his clinched fist at the retreating form of the discomfited banker. Such a thing seems beyond the bounds of probability. But there isn't any telling. Her mother may have been a thoroughly good woman and the child takes after the mother, and not after the father. Certainly she doesn't resemble him in the least, neither in face, figure or disposition. I would be willing to bet a trifle that she is no chick of his, notwithstanding that she thinks she is. He is rascal enough for anything and how can any one tell that away back in the past he did not gain possession of the child by some evil deed? That is only a surmise, of course, but to my thinking it is much more reasonable than to believe that such a girl can be the child of such a man.

"I shall hear from him soon, he said," after a moment's pause, his mind reverting to the parting words of the banker. "Now, if he was a man that meant business that would imply that in about an hour he would, well-heeled, be hunting me in the saloons of the town, and, consequently, the quicker I saw that my tools were in working order and prepared for a fight, the better it would be for me; but he don't mean war—or, at least, not openly, or in his proper person. If he could hire a gang of a half a dozen desperadoes to waylay me he would do it in a minute, but I reckon from what they know of

me in this camp, he would find a difficulty in getting men who would be willing to take the job. I'll keep my eyes open though, for there's no telling what may happen. He might chance to run across some strange pilgrims who had never had the pleasure of being introduced to me."

Then, laughing quietly to himself, Talbot walked back to the hotel.

He resumed his seat outside, lit a fresh cigar, and smoked for awhile in quiet until he was invited inside to make one of a poker-party.

It was a nice, pleasant little gathering, old Uncle Solomon Rothschild, Bully Thompson, Lee Sing, the washee-washee, and all they needed was a fourth man, and the honest Hebrew, who had noticed Talbot enjoying his cigar on the porch of the hotel when he had entered, suggested that Mister Talbot was a "goot mans," and that, possibly, he would like to take a hand in the game.

Now the wily store-keeper had a motive in suggesting that Talbot be invited to make one of the party. Dick had purchased some articles in his store that afternoon and had displayed a large amount of money, and as the Jew was one of the best card-sharps in the region, he thought if Talbot could be induced to play, there would be a chance for him to transfer some of the stranger's money into his pockets.

Talbot had not touched a card since coming to the camp. It was his custom always to hold off and watch how matters went before he ventured to try his luck.

And now when he walked in and joined the poker-players, he fully understood that he was about to lock horns with the best men in the region, as far as card-playing went.

Whether the game that they played was fair and above-board, or otherwise, no man could say, for if there was any cheating done, the trick was performed so dextrously that it was never detected.

One thing, though, all Shasta Bar knew well enough, and that was, no man, inhabitant or pilgrim from afar, had ever sat down to play poker with the three invincibles, as they were generally called, without rising a poorer and a wiser man.

And therefore when the bystanders—there was always a little throng of people around the hotel at night—beheld Talbot go in to join the poker-party, they winked at each other, then chuckled audibly after he had disappeared, and queried how long it would take the invincibles to clean the stranger out.

The invincibles themselves had been so long accustomed to "spoiling the Egyptians," that they had come to regard it only as a question of time, depending generally upon the depth of the pilgrim's purse and his boldness in the matter of betting. But by the time that the hands of the clock had moved nearly to the midnight hour, and Shasta Bar began to settle down for the night, the three old card-sharps had come to the conclusion that in Dick Talbot they had encountered a foeman worthy of their steel.

At twelve o'clock the party usually broke up, for when midnight was reached, the stranger who had been rash enough to accept the hospitality of the three was generally quite content to quit, and, in fact, almost always very glad of the chance.

But on this occasion, when the time for parting came, there wasn't one of the invincibles who was not out of pocket, while before Talbot a pile of wealth had accumulated.

"Twelve o'clock, boys," said Thompson, with a gloomy shake of the head, as he looked upon his own diminished "pile" and then regarded the goodly store of plunder that bold Injun Dick had been fortunate enough to wrest from his opponents.

Old Uncle Solomon took the loss most to heart.

"Twelve mid der clock!" he cried. "Mine gootness gracious! poys, dat ish right in der shank of der evening! Let's throw in a few more games. Mister Talbot might as well skin us clean as never vas vile he is about it."

The rest of the party were agreeable, so fresh cards were called for and the game proceeded.

Hardly had the first bet been made though when the proceedings were rudely interrupted.

Into the room rushed a crowd, and each and every man carried a weapon in his hand.

The three partners of the Old Hat mine, Colonel Perkins, Red Bill Smith, and Doctor Allcash were in the advance, closely followed by the banker, Murdock, and fifteen or twenty men of the town, prominent among whom was the veteran, the redoubtable Joseph Bowers.

The poker party looked up in surprise, and, as was only natural under the circumstances each man grabbed the money which was before him.

"Don't be alarmed, gentlemen!" cried the colonel. "We are not road-agents, but ministers of justice. Talbot, surrender! you are our prisoner!"

"Eh?" exclaimed that gentleman, for once in his life taken completely by surprise.

"Don't attempt resistance—don't attempt to draw a weapon, or we'll shoot you on the spot."

"In the name of all that is wonderful, what is the meaning of this?" Talbot exclaimed.

"We arrest you; that is what it means, and we are in sober earnest about the matter, too, and if you attempt to draw a weapon it will cost you dear, for I give you fair warning you will be shot down without mercy," the colonel replied. He and his associates had debated over the matter, and when they had determined upon the arrest, they had planned to surprise Talbot so completely that he would not have a chance to draw a weapon, for even with the overwhelming odds at their command, they feared if the prey got an opportunity to use his arms he would succeed in fighting his way through and escape.

"Gentlemen, you need not be alarmed. I haven't the slightest intention of being ugly about this matter. Since my arrival in the town I have not committed any crime, therefore I have no reason to dread the iron hand of an outraged law. I have been engaged in one little skirmish, I admit, but that was a personal affair, and ought not to count."

Talbot had not failed to notice Murdock's evil face in the throng, and he had instantly jumped to the conclusion that to the banker he was indebted for this attention.

"The charge against you, prisoner, is a much more serious one than that of being engaged in a street brawl," the colonel replied, sternly. "So up with your hands and surrender!"

For a moment Talbot looked upon the threatening faces of the men who surrounded him, and a peculiar light shone in his eyes; though encompassed by brandished weapons, so unused was he to surrendering his own, that for a moment he meditated resistance, but then reason came to his aid; the odds were too great, the chance for escape too small, for there were a dozen revolvers aimed, point-blank, at his person, and if he showed fight some bullet would be pretty certain to strike him in a vital spot. Therefore, making a virtue of necessity, he said:

"All right, colonel, yours to command, up she goes!" and suiting the action to the word he clasped his hands on the back of his neck.

The colonel himself disarmed him, but with all his care in searching for weapons the small revolver which Talbot always carried concealed in his breast escaped him.

"Now then, colonel," said Dick, after Perkins had completed his search, "will you have the kindness to inform me what is the meaning of this proceeding—of what am I accused?"

"Of being chief of the road-agents who have been making themselves so unpleasantly notorious in the neighborhood of this camp."

Talbot laughed.

"Oh, you'll find it no laughing matter, you infernal scoundrel!" cried the little doctor, who was evidently in a state of great excitement.

"Hold on, doctor, don't strike the man when he is down," Smith remonstrated.

"And, furthermore, you are charged with being one of the men who laid in wait in the house of Mr. Murdock here, bound and gagged him, and then robbed the house."

"This accusation is as absurd as the other and this man, I presume, is my accuser," and Talbot indicated Murdock.

"Yes, I am, and you will find when we

come to trial that I can prove the truth of my accusations!" Murdock exclaimed.

The banker had kept his word. Talbot had heard from him soon and with a vengeance.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TRIAL.

THE arrest of Talbot created the greatest excitement in the town, although it was not until morning that the fact became generally known.

Murdock was a skillful fighter, and acted on the principle that the first blow was half the battle, and was a firm believer, too, in the motto of Richelieu, the great Frenchman: "First, use all means to conciliate; failing that, all means to crush!" He had attempted to attach Talbot to his side by offering him his daughter, for, misled by De Welcher, he had fallen into the error of believing that a secret attachment existed between the two. In this endeavor he had most completely failed, and then, without loss of time, he had set to work to crush the foe who despised his bribe.

Going directly to the Old Hat men, he had made known to them that information had reached him in regard to the identity of the leader of the desperado band, who had at last, according to his story, succeeded in getting possession of the ten thousand dollars.

Allcash, who had gone partially out of his senses in regard to the matter, jumped eagerly at the idea, although the colonel and Smith were doubtful.

But Murdock was so positive about the matter, and swore so earnestly that he had witnesses to prove that Talbot was the leader of the masked band, that the two finally yielded assent to Allcash's demand that Talbot be immediately arrested and tried.

A posse was organized, and our hero arrested as has already been described.

In the morning the town was in a ferment. All work was suspended, and every miner for ten miles around was in the Bar.

News of this sort travels fast, and the report that Judge Lynch was up, and the Vigilantes held the town, was quite enough to bring everybody in to see the "fun."

Up in that wild region there were no regular authorities, and when a case of this kind came up, the Vigilantes invariably made their appearance, and "Judge Lynch" was called upon to boss the job.

Talbot had been placed in a secure place, guarded by well-armed men, and in the morning the first thing the crowd did after the sun got fairly up was to choose a man to act as master of ceremonies. Colonel Perkins, in spite of his remonstrances, was a hot favorite for the judgeship. It wasn't of the least use for Perkins to declare that as he was personally interested in the matter, it wasn't proper that he should sit in judgment upon the accused. The crowd wouldn't take no for an answer, and so at last the colonel was obliged to yield to the wish of the multitude.

Bully Thompson was unanimously elected sheriff and ten good men and true selected for his posse.

Just at the hour of eight the trial began.

The court, after the usual fashion, was convened right in the open street so that all could have a view of the proceedings.

Talbot under a strong guard, was produced, and the proceedings began.

Perkins made a brief speech reciting the causes which had led to the uprising and wound up by declaring that as far as lay in his power nothing but justice should be meted out.

A low murmur of assent went up from the crowd, for there was very little bias against Talbot, and there were fully as many in the assemblage who thought him to be innocent as there were believers in his guilt.

"Your name?" quoth Perkins.

"Richard Talbot."

"Occupation?"

"Gentleman at leisure."

"Are you guilty or not guilty?"

"I might inflict the old joke on you of asking you to wait until I hear the evidence, before I reply, but I refrain, only saying, let me know of what I am accused," the prisoner replied.

"Of being the chief of the road-agent band

who have lately made their appearance in the neighborhood.

"I deny the charge—it is a lie from beginning to end; I am not guilty," answered the prisoner.

"Let the accuser stand forward," said the judge.

Murdock stepped from amid the crowd and confronted Talbot.

A murmur passed through the crowd; the banker was not generally liked; he had come down with a heavy hand upon many present and the sufferers had little love for him.

"Well, Mr. Murdock, what do you say about this matter?" asked the judge.

"You all know, judge, how I was stopped and robbed on the road between here and Cinnabar City. Then the money package, which was taken from me on that occasion and which contained ten thousand dollars, was mysteriously returned by a disguised man whom I, and another witness, recognized as this Talbot. That very night—or rather the next morning, for it was after midnight—before I had a chance to pay the money over to the Old Hat Mining Company, to whom it belonged. I was assaulted in my house on returning home by a masked band of men, three in number, who bound and gagged both my daughter and myself, and took from her the money package which I had intrusted to her care. As you know, judge, I was pretty near dead when I was rescued by you, Smith and Allcash. Pursuit was given but no clew could be gained to the ruffians. The next day this man, Talbot, called upon me and said that a friend of his had intrusted him with the money package to return to me. The package had been opened, the bank-bills abstracted and worthless advertising greenbacks left in their place, but in regard to this matter this Talbot professed ignorance."

"No, I didn't! Why don't you tell the truth about the matter?" Talbot exclaimed. "I told you I believed you were the man who had the money, that I felt certain the genuine notes had never been in the envelope at all, but that it was a decoy package got up by you expressly for the purpose of robbing the rightful owners of their money."

"You see, judge, it is the old game of the pickpocket crying 'Stop thief,' in order to divert suspicion from himself!" Murdock exclaimed.

"Proof is what this court is after," the colonel declared. In his own mind Perkins was not so sure of Talbot's guilt. He had distrusted Murdock from the first, and improbable as the prisoner's assertion seemed at the first glance, it was not impossible that there might be some truth in it.

"I am ready to present proof of this man's guilt that will convince anybody!" Murdock asserted.

"And you, prisoner, what have you to say about it?" the judge asked. "Have you any proof to back up your accusation?"

"Hold on, judge!" cried Murdock, hastily, and evidently annoyed. "I reckon I ain't on trial!"

"Mr. Murdock, this court is convened to find out the truth in regard to this matter. The whole town is on trial, as far as that goes. We are after justice, and we intend to have it though the heavens fall! You have made certain accusations against this man, and those accusations have been weighty enough to warrant the calling out of the Vigilantes and his arrest. Now, he accuses you, and why shouldn't we listen to his words as well as to yours?"

"See the difference in our characters! I am an old resident of the town; everybody knows me—"

"An' knows no good of you, you blood-sucker!" cried a hoarse voice from amid the crowd, and the exclamation caused a general snicker.

The speaker was the veteran Bowers, who had been indignant to the highest degree when he had discovered that it was Talbot that the armed satellites of Judge Lynch were after. The bummer, who was an old-time acquaintance of our hero, had recognized him immediately, and during the morning hours he had done some pretty tall talking about the stupidity of the arrest. "Dick Talbot—bold Injun Dick!" he had declared, "a clean white man, from his teeth to his toe-nails, accused by that skunk of a pawnbroker, who called himself a banker, it was

enough to make old Shasta himself git up on his hind legs and howl!"

"We weight man 'gainst man in this hyer Californian land," the colonel replied. "One oath is as good as another, but we want proof to back any accusation."

"I'll give you ample proof!" the banker declared.

"And what do you say, prisoner?"

"Well, judge, I don't know as I can give much proof," Talbot replied. "In such a case as this the evidence, from the nature of the thing, must be chiefly circumstantial. The man who arranges such a scheme of villainy is not apt to be unwise enough to fix the matter so that the thing can be proven against him if the plan miscarries."

"To carry out such a scheme I must have had confederates, and their evidence would be conclusive," Murdock remarked.

"Yes, if they choose to betray you, which is not likely, for by so doing they would run their own heads into danger," the prisoner answered.

"Men sometimes do just such foolish things," Murdock sneered, and Talbot instantly guessed that the banker had prepared some trap to spring upon him.

"I have told my story," Murdock continued. "Now let the prisoner tell his, and then we will see which is the most probable of the two, and which has the most proof to back it up."

The colonel nodded assent; the proposition seemed reasonable.

"This man does not deny that he had the interview with me in regard to the money package; now let him tell how he came to be interested in the affair."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TRIAL.

"Go ahead, prisoner, tell your story," Judge Lynch said, fixing an earnest gaze upon Talbot's face, as though satisfied that he could tell by the expression upon his features whether he was speaking truth or not.

"It is a plain, round, unvarnished tale, judge; it will seem rather improbable, I presume, but it is the truth," Talbot remarked.

"On my way to this camp I happened to overhear some desperadoes planning to rob the stage on its way up from Cinnabar City, their principal object being to get possession of the ten-thousand-dollar package carried by Mr. Murdock. They knew all about the package and at the time I was puzzled to account for their knowledge, for I did not comprehend why a man carrying such an amount of money as that on his person, should not be wise enough to keep the fact to himself. But there wasn't any time to be lost, there was no chance afforded me to give the alarm to any one, and so, in order to head off the desperadoes, I made up my mind to go through the stage myself, which I did. I secured the plunder, and when the rascals stopped the stage an hour later, they only had their trouble for their pains. Every article that was taken from the passengers in the hearse was promptly and carefully returned. You can probably bear witness to that, judge."

The colonel nodded.

"And the Chinaman, Lee Sing, will tell you, too, that the five thousand dollars taken from him were returned without the deduction of a penny."

"Allee light!" cried the heathen, from amid the crowd.

"The package which was supposed to contain the ten thousand dollars was returned by me to Mr. Murdock unopened. He will admit that, I presume?"

"Yes, the package seemed to be all right," the banker observed.

"But, instead of paying the money over into the hands of the rightful owners, he held on to it and contented himself with notifying them that it had been recovered," Talbot continued.

"My suspicions had been aroused in regard to Murdock, and I had determined to watch him. I tracked him to the Old Hat works and played the spy in order to see if he paid the money over, and when I found that he had not, I felt sure that he had had a hand in the robbery, and that he delayed paying the money in order to give his confederates another chance at it. I watched him back to his house, and then saw the des-

peradoes come skulking from it. I felt satisfied that my suspicions were correct. Murdock had arranged to be robbed, but the rascals whom he employed, not realizing the shrewdness of the man with whom they were dealing, thought to do a stroke of business on their own hook, and believing that the package really contained ten thousand dollars, they resolved to help themselves to the money; and so they tied their master up in such good earnest that, if assistance had not arrived, he would have passed in his checks before morning. But he had provided against just such a chance, and had filled the envelope with worthless bits of paper instead of genuine bills. I followed the rascals, and surprised them just as they were about to divide the plunder. We had a fight, and I whipped them; then, in order to satisfy myself, for I had a suspicion that all was not right, I examined the package and discovered the cheat. At the first convenient moment I took occasion to wait upon Mr. Murdock, and I unbosomed myself quite freely in regard to the affair. I had become mixed up in it, and I made up my mind to see it through. I told Murdock that he had made away with the money, and if he didn't make it good within twenty-four hours he would have to settle with me. He meditated over the matter for five or six hours, and then he attempted to bribe me to keep quiet about it. I wouldn't have it, and this charge is the result. That is my story, judge, whit-tled down as fine as I can get it."

"Colonel, it is an insult to common sense for this man to think that any one possessed of reason would give a moment's credence to this utterly ridiculous tale!" Murdock declared. "I have accused him—he knows that the proof is strong against him, and so he thinks to throw doubt upon my accusation by reciting this cock-and-bull story. He admits that he did rob the stage in the first place—"

"Yes, but he returned all the articles that were taken; there isn't any doubt about that," the colonel remarked.

"I am aware of that fact, but I ascribe his action to the fear that so bold a robbery might lead to his detection. The ten thousand dollars that I had was mainly what he was after," Murdock replied.

"But he had the package, which was supposed to contain the money, safe enough; I don't see why he should give the money back only to steal it over again," the judge remarked, and most of the crowd shook their heads. This was a riddle that no one of them could guess.

"Well, judge, I will own I cannot explain that myself," said Murdock, "but the fact is that though he did give the money back, I am ready to swear that he was the man that stole it again."

"Give us some proof upon this point!" exclaimed the colonel, a little impatiently. "Assertion is not proof, you know. You say he did, he says he didn't, so the honors are easy. Give us some evidence that he is the man that committed the second robbery."

"I can do it, upon one condition," Murdock cried.

"A condition? Well, what is it?"

"I can give you the best proof in the world if you will agree to hold blameless of all harm the men whom I bring forward, for by testifying they accuse themselves."

"Confederates of the prisoner?" questioned the colonel.

"Yes, who are ready to come forward and make a clean breast of it if you will promise that they shall not be punished for what they have done."

"Judge, these men are his confederates, not mine, and now he is bringing them forward to swear my life away!" Talbot exclaimed.

"You can cross examine them if you like," the colonel said. "You can bet your bottom dollar, Talbot, we are going to get at the truth of this matter if it takes a month. We agree to your proposition," he said to Murdock. "Produce your witnesses and no matter what they have done they shall go free of harm."

"That is all they want; they are sick of the business," Murdock remarked, "and they are glad of a chance to get out of it and also to escape from the tyranny of this man, Talbot, who has ruled them with a rod of

iron, and forced them in spite of themselves to become outlaws and desperadoes."

The crowd was all attention now for matters were getting decidedly interesting.

"Let your men come forward and I give them my word of honor that they speak freely without fear of the consequences," the colonel declared.

"Come this way!" said Murdock.

The witnesses were in readiness for the summons; through the crowd, from where they had been standing on the outskirts, came Shanghai Sam and Poker Jim.

For the life of him Talbot could not help a quiet smile when he beheld the two bullies forcing their way through the crowd.

"These are the men," Murdock remarked, when the precious pair arrived in front of Judge Lynch.

Neither the colonel nor anybody else were impressed by the appearance of the witnesses.

Poker Jim was well known in the Bar, and his word wouldn't have been good even for a drink in the meanest saloon in the town.

Shanghai Sam was, comparatively, a stranger, but from what little Shasta Bar had seen of him, the town had not formed a favorable opinion.

"Ah," grunted the colonel, as the two men with a sort of defiant air ranged themselves before him, "well, what do you know of this case?"

"Pard, I will deal furst if sò be as how you hain't ary objections," observed Sam to his companion.

"Go ahead!"

The men showed evident signs of having been engaged in a recent encounter, and the bandages which covered their wounds did not add to their appearance.

"Judge, we are going to spin a yarn as straight as a string!" the ruffian declared. "We are anxious to git shut of the hull business. We ain't pooty, but from this day out we calculate to be good," and the bravo grinned at his humor.

"This hyer man has been the galoot w'ot has led us astray," and he pointed his dirty finger at Talbot. "He kinder dazzled our eyes, you know, with the idee that we could make a heap of money jest as easy as rolling off a log, and so we went inter the game. He put up the job to rob the stage, and we lay back in the bushes while he went through the passengers, but if there had been any fight shown we would have come to the fore. Then he got frightened and allowed we had better give the things back and content ourselves with gobbling the ten thousand dollars that Murdock had, and we d'd it, as all you folks know. We had a divvy up in the rocks, or leastways, we sat down to have a divvy, but when our boss come to fetch out the package it was cut open and thar wasn't anything but the old store bills in it. Then he up and sed that he reckoned Murdock had put up that job, and that he would go for him and see if he couldn't scare some money out of him, but we knew better than that—we knew that he had got the leetle ten thousand and was a-going to beat us out of our divvy, and so my pard and me, we jest put our heads together and we made up our minds to see Mr. Murdock and give the hull thing away, and we did, and that's all I know about it."

"That's the Gospel truth!" Poker Jim declared. "He went for us, for to cheat us out of our divvy, and we proposed to go for him and fix him for a hempen neck-tie and a pine-box!"

"What do you say to this, prisoner?" asked the judge.

"It is a lie from beginning to end, and I think I can prove it so," he replied.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE REVELATION.

"Go ahead! the truth is what we want!" the judge remarked.

"See how improbable this story is that I am a confederate of these two men," said Talbot. "There are, probably, plenty here who saw me clean out the loud-mouthed bravado in a street fight, and that was *after* the first robbery and *before* the second."

"He jumped me 'cos I was kicking ag'in' his being boss!" cried Shanghai, sulkily, for the fellow had brains enough to see that Talbot had made a strong point.

"That is a likely story! but you can judge in regard to that as well as I, colonel," re-

plied Talbot, contemptuously. "I appeal to all in the crowd who witnessed the affair if this fellow didn't act and talk as if he had never seen me before?"

"Yes, yes, that's so!" cried a dozen voices.

"It was all made up between us that we should make out we wasn't pards and had never seen each other afore when we met in this hyer town!" cried Shanghai, desperately, feeling that the tide of sentiment was setting against him.

"That is another likely story," commented Talbot. "Now, judge, the truth of the matter is, these two men and a third one, who is at present under the weather from wounds inflicted by my hand, were the scoundrels hired by banker Murdock here to carry out his evil designs. The three were the three whom I overheard planning to rob the stage, and whose design I baffled by getting in ahead of them. They were the three who laid in wait for Murdock and succeeded in getting hold of the money package, just as he had arranged for them to do. I tracked them to the hills and in a fair fight succeeded in wresting their prey from them, only to find out, however, that Murdock had been too smart for his tools, and had made sure that they should not abstract the money by securing it himself. They bear the wounds made by my weapons on their persons now. I defy them to account for their hurts in any other way."

"They are old wounds, and I fell down the rocks this morning and re-opened them," Shanghai declared, unblushingly.

"And you fell down the rocks too, I suppose," the colonel said to Poker Jim, perfectly satisfied that Sam was lying.

"No, I was 'salted last night when on a tear by some cusses who got away with me."

"You can prove this, of course?"

"If I could find the fellers w'ot did it, I could, maybe," replied Jim, reluctantly.

"Murdock, I must say that you haven't succeeded in making out a very strong case," the colonel remarked, abruptly.

"Ain't the words of these men enough?" questioned the banker, angrily.

"Enough!" cried the judge. "I wouldn't hang a yellow dog on the oaths of two such scoundrels!"

And many a head in the crowd nodded assent to this declaration.

"Talbot, can't you bring any witnesses to prove your charge?" the judge continued. "Isn't there anybody that can prove that these men were in cahoots with Murdock?" the colonel asked, evidently impressed with the belief that the prisoner's story was far more worthy of belief than his accusers'.

"Judge, under the circumstances of the case, I am afraid that circumstantial evidence is about all that I can offer. I know by this man's words and actions"—and he pointed to Shanghai Sam—"that he was a tool of the banker, but where to find a witness to prove that is more than I can do."

"You are wrong, Mr. Talbot!" cried a woman's voice from amid the crowd, and then Mrs. Ashford advanced from the throng. "I am a witness that this man, who now calls himself Murdock, and this red-handed ruffian here, are old acquaintances!"

There was an audible murmur of astonishment from the crowd at this announcement.

Murdock's face grew pale, and he trembled with nervous excitement. The apprehensions which he had felt when he had first encountered the woman were now realized, and he cursed his own folly that he had not given heed to the warning and taken measures to prevent the woman from doing him harm.

It was too late now, and all that he could do was to meet the issue as bravely as possible.

"This statement is utterly ridiculous!" he cried. "I never saw this woman before in my life."

"Nor I neither!" Shanghai Sam declared.

"She is mad to say such a thing," Murdock continued.

"Not much she ain't!" Bully Thompson cried, glad of a chance to interfere in behalf of the lady whom he regarded as a paragon. "She's got as much sense as any critter in this town, and she's going to spit out now jest what she likes, and if any galoot objects, he and me will fight! This is my horn that's blowing, and don't you forget it!"

"Go on, madam; be assured you shall be

protected in your right to speak," the colonel said, strangely agitated as he gazed earnestly upon the lady's face.

"Many years ago this man wronged me in the foulest manner," she began, pointing with out-stretched finger at the white-faced banker, "and this villain here was his subservient tool," and she indicated the bravo Sam, who began to tremble in his boots and wish himself well out of the scrape. "Years ago," she continued, "this man was my husband's trusted agent. He attended to his property, handled his money, and when my husband was called from home everything was left in his charge, and how did he fulfill the trust? Like the base villain that he was, he attempted to win my love, and then, when repulsed with scorn, with the assistance of this lesser, but more brutal knave, he abducted me and my infant child. I was kept a close prisoner, my daughter taken from me, and persecuted in the most fiendish manner, until at last my reason gave way and I became so violent that he was forced to place me in a lunatic asylum, and there for ten years I remained, literally buried from the world. But at last my disorder passed away and I was discharged as cured.

"I came forth into the world only to find that persecutor, child, husband, all had disappeared, leaving no trace behind them. For years I wandered irresolutely from city to city, vainly seeking my lost loved ones. At last, in a dream, I was directed to come to this obscure valley; I doubted the inspiration, and for a time fought against it, but finally I yielded, and when I arrived here I found that my vision had been inspired by Heaven, for in this camp Providence had brought together my husband and child, the villain who had wrecked my life, and the base wretch who had acted as my jailer. The lapse of years had worked such changes in the personal appearance of all of us, that my husband had not recognized his false servant, and neither of the two villains suspected my identity."

Judge Lynch was on his feet now, trembling with excitement.

"The scales have fallen from my eyes!" he cried. "Your name is Marah?"

"Right, and this villain is Robert Denville."

"My wifel" the colonel cried, and the next moment they were locked in each other's arms.

Strong hands were laid upon the revealed knaves, and angry voices threatened them.

"Mercy, mercy!" cried the banker, white in abject fear. "I will make all the reparation I can; I will restore the money; the child is safe; I have reared her as my own—Carlotta is the colonel's daughter!"

A shriek rung out on the air, and the girl, who, concealed behind a curtain in a window of Murdock's house, was watching the strange scene, fainted.

The two wretches might have as well asked for mercy from a pack of famished wolves, so excited were the men of Shasta Bar.

Away the two were dragged, lariats were rigged to the branches of some neighboring trees, and within ten minutes justice had been done, and two dead men swung into the air.

The meeting between father, mother and daughter, so long separated, was a joyful one, as may be well imagined.

Talbot, too, came in for a share of the gladness, for all agreed that he had much to do with bringing about the happy result, but he modestly disclaimed all responsibility.

"We must find some way to pay you, Mr. Talbot!" the colonel declared, and as he spoke, his eyes happened to rest upon his daughter's face, and to his surprise he saw that she was blushing like a red, red rose; Talbot also seemed embarrassed.

"Aha, I guess we will not have much difficulty in arranging that matter," the colonel continued when he made this discovery.

There was an exchange of glances between the two young people, and each felt that the secret was a secret no longer.

De Welcher was a witness to this scene, and satisfied that his quest was hopeless he departed from the camp as soon as possible, fearfully angry though, and swearing to himself that he would give all his fortune to be avenged upon the man who had triumphed over him.

A few more words, and our tale is told. The ten thousand dollars belonging to the Old Hat Mining Company, and which has played so prominent a part in our story, thanks to the receipt discovered upon Murdock's person, was recovered by its rightful owners, who found it an easy task to prove that it was their property.

The money put the mining company upon its legs at once. The works were enlarged, and Talbot, who was an expert in such matters, engaged as superintendent, and Rumor with her hundred tongues, who sometimes tells truths as well as fables, whispers that ere long the peerless Carlotta will be his bride.

Again moored in the haven of peace we leave our hero, blessed with the love of a glorious girl, and respected by all who, honored by his acquaintance, boast that in all the Shasta region there is no better man than Lion-Hearted Dick.

THE END.

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